WOLF MAN
UNIVERSAL'S MONSTER RETURNS

SEVERANCE
LUMON EMPLOYEES CHECK IN

SFX

SFX 30 YEARS

MAYFAIR WITCHES
THE IMMORTAL UNIVERSE GROWS

PRESENCE
STEVEN SODERBERGH'S HAUNTED HOUSE HORROR

GOOSEBUMPS
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STAR TREK SECTION 31

BOW DOWN TO YOUR EMPEROR!

STARMAN
JOHN CARPENTER LOOKS BACK

FUTURE

PLUS! COMPANION | GET AWAY | POLTERGEIST II | THE RIG | METAMORPHO | DOCTOR WHO V: UK | CAPTAIN AMERICA | SILVERHAWKS | TIMESLIDE | JUSTICE LEAGUE | WEREWOLVES!

THE DALEK

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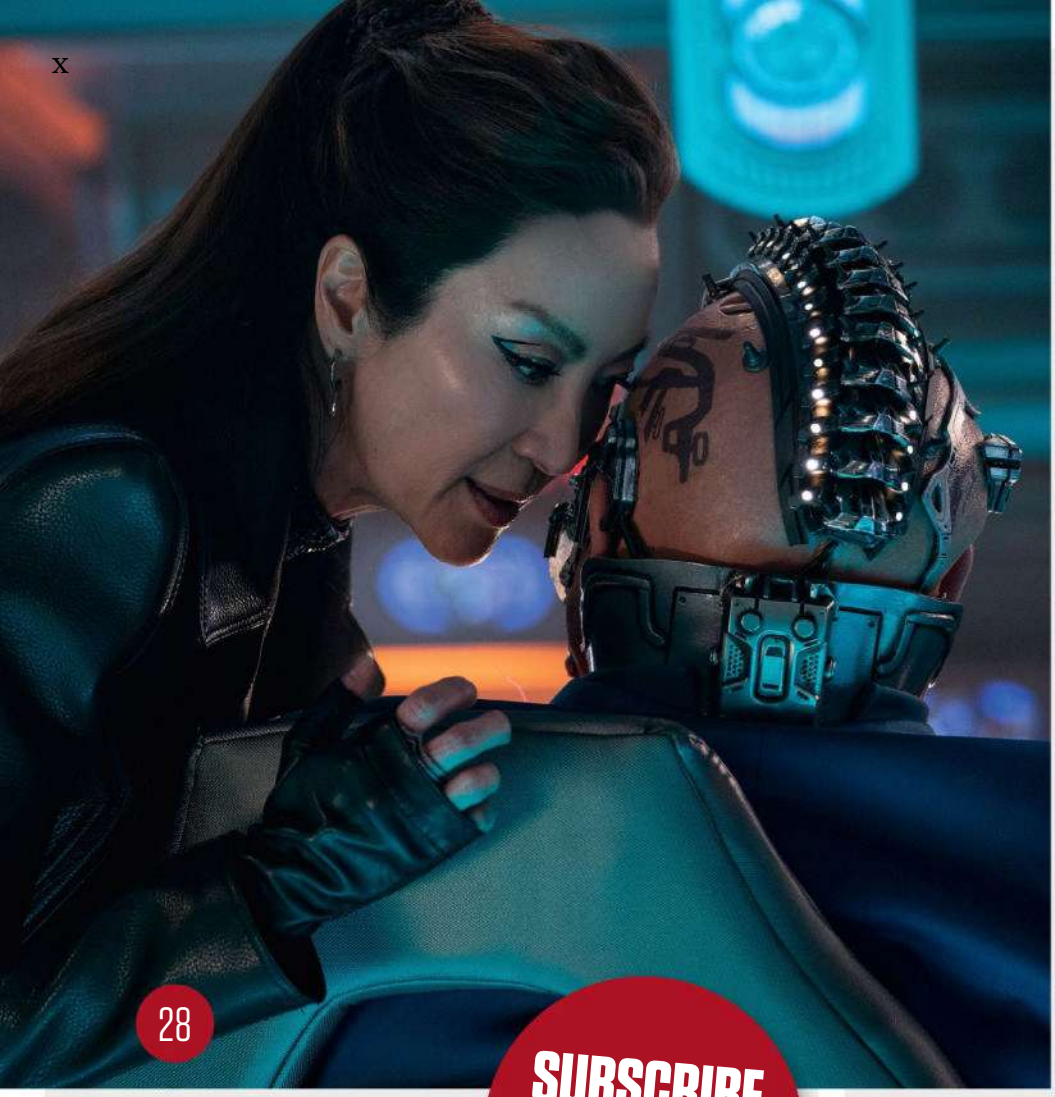

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Silent Running's heart-melting droids Huey, Dewey and Louie. No, *you're* crying.

Captain's Log

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Welcome to the future! It's early December as I write this, quite possibly 2025 as you read it, and by the time you do we'll be putting the finishing touches to the issue out in February. Who said anything about holidays?

But what's most important about 2025 is that we're celebrating a frankly massive anniversary! Yes, *SFX* will be 30 years young. We think that's something to be proud of, especially when you look at the magazine landscape recently.

Are we the only sci-fi magazine (that's not based on a children's show) that's been in constant print since its first issue? Probably, yes. Does that make us the world's longest-running sci-fi magazine without any gaps? Probably, yes. Does that mean we'll be doing our best to shout about it and celebrate for the next 12 months? Oh, absolutely!

We obviously love *SFX*, and yes it's evolved into something much more than "just" a sci-fi mag. Sadly we're one of the last few mainstream UK film publications too. But back when we launched with *that Tank Girl* cover, being a geek wasn't *cool*. It wasn't *mainstream*. And look at us now... we truly did inherit the Earth. So we'll be doing a lot more to spread the *SFX* word next year – meanwhile you should definitely check us out on YouTube and TikTok! Yes, yes, I know, "How do you do, fellow kids?" Hey, I was nine when issue one came out. [This is a lie – Ian]

See you back here in four very short weeks!

Darren X

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Rants & Raves

Inside the *SFX* hive mind

DARREN SCOTT EDITOR

RAVES

→ *Nosferatu* is incredible. Stunning and gorgeous, it's also wickedly evil. You must see it on the big screen!

→ Adored *Section 31*. It feels just like *Trek*, but also like a new kind of *Trek*. But technically old *Trek*, of course...

RANTS

→ Love that *The Box Of Delights* got a Blu-ray release, and the documentary is divine – but I can't help feeling it was still a missed opportunity to really give it the whole *Doctor Who* treatment.

IAN BERRIMAN DEPUTY EDITOR

RAVES

→ Flew to Prague to tour the sets of forthcoming Prime Video show *Blade Runner 2099*, which were *very* cool. Expect a ton of behind-the-scenes material at a future date...

→ Enjoyed watching the deleted scenes from Ncuti Gatwa's first season/the 60th anniversary specials (bit.ly/dwdeleted). Being one of those pedants who appreciates explanations, I think they should have kept in "The Devil's Chord" scene 72!

→ After seeing the trailer, I'm really looking forward to *28 Years Later*. Loved the use of a Rudyard Kipling poem over the top.

→ Titan's new collection of Jamie Hewlett's *Phoo Action* is a thing of beauty.

JONATHAN COATES ART EDITOR

RAVES

→ *Skeleton Crew* has managed to drag me kicking and screaming back to *Star Wars*. By far their best show in ages. I do think it works best when it's a "kids versus the universe" dynamic, without the adult supervision, though.

ED RICKETTS PRODUCTION EDITOR

RAVES

→ The original 2002 PC game *The Thing* was a brilliant unofficial sequel to the 1982 film, if a bit janky. The new *Remastered* version is even better, bringing it up to date for modern hardware. Trust no one...

NICK SETCHFIELD EDITOR-AT-LARGE

RAVES

→ Always a treat to receive the latest issue of *Hellebore*, a magazine that celebrates the supernatural in fine style. Hugely recommended to any lovers of the shadows. Check it out at helleborezine.bigcartel.com

→ Overjoyed to hear the *Moonraker* soundtrack is finally receiving a lavish release from La-La Land Records. John Barry at his best!

TARA BENNETT US EDITOR

RAVES

→ It's been a long wait, but *Severance* is back in top form with season two. It's pulling from a deeper well of story and expanding the universe in an intriguing way.

RANTS

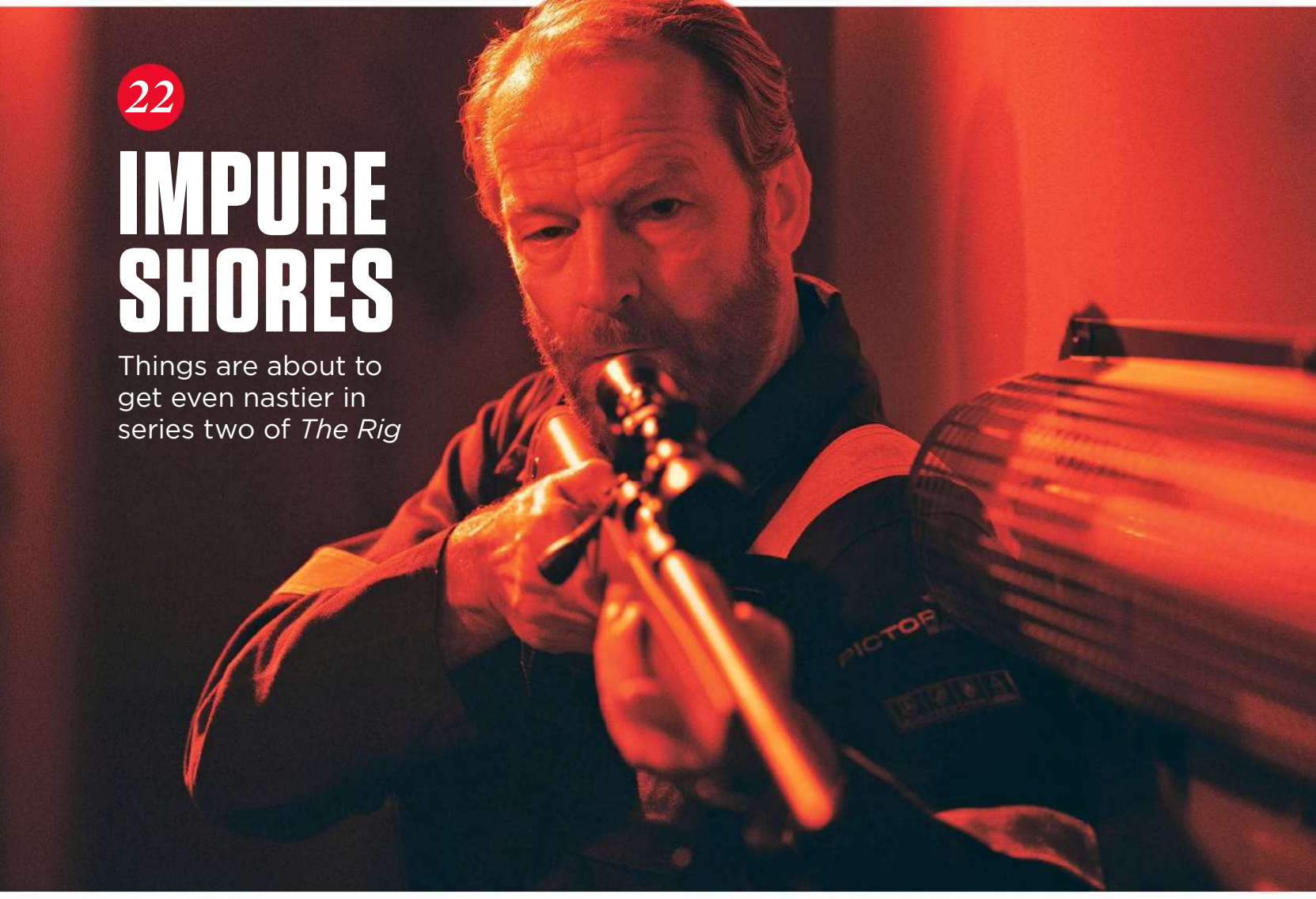
→ In 2025, Marvel Studios will release *nine* new projects across streaming and theatrical. What happened to slowing down?

THE FUTURE FIRST!

Red Alert

JANUARY 2025

→ NEWS //// INTERVIEWS //// INSIGHT //// GUINEA PIGS!



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IMPURE SHORES

Things are about to get even nastier in series two of *The Rig*

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→ A new messed-up horror from the makers of *Barbarian*? Oh, we will indeed be seated.

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DOCTOR WHO
→ Let's take it from the top – the very top this time... Jo Martin returns as the Fugitive Doctor on audio.

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WEREWOLVES
→ But these aren't the kind of lycanthropes you'll see on a stage at Halloween Horror Nights...

Sophie Thatcher and Jack Quaid: happy couple.

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

A Horrible Relationship

The director of **Companion** teases his twisty, terrifying new film WORDS: **JACK SHEPHERD**

"I DON'T KNOW HOW WE'RE going to do this," Drew Hancock tells Red Alert. We're discussing the *My Dead Ex* writer's directorial debut *Companion*, a much-hyped thriller starring Sophie Thatcher and Jack Quaid, and we've been warned by Warner Bros not to talk about the film's first-act twist. "It's not like we're hiding it as a third-act twist!" he continues. "After it happens, you're like, 'Oh, this is what this movie is!' It gets fun. It gets weird. It gets violent. It goes in a lot of different directions."

It's not just the movie that's full of twists; even the trailer pulls off a surprise. What starts as an advert for a romcom, with Quaid and Thatcher's characters sharing glances over dinner, transforms into horror as the camera reveals Thatcher is handcuffed to her chair.

After all, *Companion* is from the studio behind *The Notebook* and the terrifying production team behind 2022's *Barbarian*. "We're selling this as a horror-ish movie, but it's six different genres," Hancock says. "I would actually put horror fourth or fifth down the list."

To discuss the story's predominant genre would give half the story away. "We showed the film to two focus groups," Hancock says. "One where people didn't know anything about it and one where they knew the twist. For the people who didn't know, it was like cotton candy. They did not see it coming.

"You could just hear collective awe. I mean, a lot of people are guessing correctly from the trailer, but that doesn't bother me because there are enough breadcrumbs within the movie, little Easter eggs, that you can enjoy those in your first viewing. And if you don't pick up on them, then you can go back and

> I wanted to sit down and write something that I would want to watch

watch it a second time and be like, 'Oh, that's why that's there.'"

Companion isn't a single-twist movie either; there are umpteen unexpected turns throughout. That was all part of the fun for Hancock, who previously spent years writing for TV shows, predominantly in the comedy genre (and yes, *Companion* is very funny).

"My favourite movie is *The Silence Of The Lambs*," he says. "But no one was hiring me to do those kinds of genre movies. I was like, 'Well, you're an idiot, your IMDb is a mess. You're doing all these things and having a great time, but none of them represent your voice.' I wanted to sit down and write something that I would want to watch."

WITH FRIENDS LIKE THESE...

The first image that came to Hancock's head while writing *Companion* was of a woman walking through the woods and coming across an empty grave. Upon closer inspection, she realises that the grave is her own. She was meant to be on a weekend away with her friends in the remote countryside. But she soon finds that actually she's been invited along for nefarious purposes, and that she's going to be the victim of what's happening. "And that just made me think, 'Who is this? Why is she there?'"

While a woman does not come across her own grave in the final movie, with that image in mind Hancock started working out who she was. The result was *Companion*, the script for which landed on the desk of *Barbarian* director Zach Cregger. He was initially going to direct the film, but following the success of *Barbarian*, he stepped aside to work on an original project of his own, paving the way for Hancock to take over.

From there, the pieces fell into place and casting began. Quaid was quickly on board as a horrifying boyfriend. "Taking someone with a baby face and giving them moments of aggression and anger, it's the contradiction that makes it so much scarier," says Hancock. Then, after a much lengthier casting process, came Thatcher. "She makes the movie," the director says. "I can't imagine anyone else in that role. I knew before we started rolling that it was a really tough part to cast.

"We started auditioning so many good actresses – I don't want to undersell the quality of actresses – but there's the emotional journey she goes on which many struggled with. Five seconds into Sophie's performance, my heart was pounding so fast because I was thinking about a future where this movie didn't have her."

Before Hancock can go on, he has to stop; we would be going into pesky spoiler territory. Instead, he summarises the film's core story: "It is ultimately the story of a guy and a girl breaking up. It's a break-up movie. There's a lot of other stuff happening, but it does have romcom juice."

A romcom in *SFX*? Now there's a twist...

Companion is in cinemas from 31 January.

SCI-FACT! **Next up for Drew Hancock: *My Wife And I Bought A Ranch*, a supernatural horror based on a short story by Matt Query.**

WRITER/ACTOR EXCLUSIVE

A Touch Of Frost

Nick Frost reveals all about his new *Wicker Man*-influenced comedy

WORDS: **STEVE O'BRIEN**

NICK FROST HAS APPEARED IN many types of horror over the years, from zom-romcoms (*Shaun Of The Dead*) to alien invasion extravaganzas (*Attack The Block*) to comic splatterfests (*Slaughterhouse Rulez*), but there's one genre, close to the actor's heart, that he's only just got around to: folk horror.

Get Away is not just Nick Frost's first foray into *Wicker Man/Midsommar* waters, it's also his first movie as sole writer (he co-penned 2011's *Paul* with old mucker Simon Pegg). So why folk horror and why now?

"About five years ago, I'm not sure what happened, but I suddenly wanted to write all the time," Frost tells Red Alert about how his new horror-comedy came about. "It's as if someone just clicked my creativity button."

The germ of the idea for what would become *Get Away* was formed two decades ago when holidaying in Sweden with his then-wife – on an island in the Baltic Sea specifically – a location the couple would return to regularly over the years.

"I kind of got to know the locals a tiny bit, and they were all very insulated," he says. "Even though they'd known me for 20 years, they'd never really speak to me.

"The Scandinavians," he goes on, "have these traditions and they have this culture, and there are these real *Midsommar* vibes."

It struck Frost how ripe this dynamic was for a folk horror, albeit with a comic slant, conjuring up a story of an English family who travel to a remote Swedish island only to find themselves treated as very much the outsiders.

Sebastian Croft and Maisie Ayres play the siblings.

Have a nice biscuit and wait for it all to blow over.

> **Stefan's young and funny and he's charming. He's a great director and worked hard**

The movie certainly plays on many of the tropes of folk horror, while at the same time cleverly inverting many of them (we can't say any more). With the script being so genre-literate, Frost, who wasn't interested in directing, needed a director who understood what he was trying to do. Enter Dutch filmmaker Steffen Haars.

"We made two films together last year," says Frost, referring to this movie and horror comedy *Krazy House*, which the two shot in Amsterdam in 2023. "Steffan's young and he's funny and he's charming. He's a great director and worked hard. He has that thing that Edgar [Wright] does that he's got a real knowledge of film."

Starring as Frost's wife is Aisling Bea, an actor Frost has nothing but admiration for. "She was top of our list for the character of Mummy," he tells us. "I went and had dinner with her, and within 15 minutes, we were like balls deep in each other's lives, so to speak. It was just like, yeah, you're absolutely who I'd want to spend two months with in Finland [which doubles for Sweden]."

Equally impressive are Sebastian Croft and Maisie Ayres, who play the couple's teenage children. "Sebastian I've worked with quite a bit," Frost says. "He played a Roman boy in the *Horrible Histories* movie that I did. He was 14 or 15 then and was great – he had a real gangly physicality, and was really fun to be around. Then we did another film a couple of years ago, and when I was writing this I just had him in mind. Maisie hadn't done much at all, but we saw quite a few people for that character on Zoom and she just lit the screen up. It was incredible."

Since he started writing on his own five years ago, Frost says he's accumulated "a massive amount" of ideas, all of which he stores on his iPhone. "Some obviously are just shit," he laughs, "but some I end up thinking about a lot."

He's currently beavering away on a second draft of his follow-up movie, which he teases is another horror, but this time "more supernatural". Time will tell, though, whether it actually happens.

"We just have to get it financed, that's the tricky bit," he says. "Part of me would like to hope that if *Get Away* does well, and people like it, then someone will say, 'Okay, why don't you make another one?'"

More immediately, Frost is continuing to film the live-action remake of *How To Train Your Dragon* (he's playing Gobber the Belch opposite Mason Thames and Nico Parker), a movie that he says is the biggest he's ever worked on.

"That's what I love about my job," he enthuses, "where you can go and do a really small film with a really small crew, and then the next month, you're in Belfast, and there's like 800 crew and four cameras in every shot.

He adds, "*Snow White And The Huntsman*, that was pretty big, but this, well, this was like... 'Wow!'"

Get Away is on Sky Cinema and NOW from 10 January.

SCI-FACT! **Frost and his co-stars now have a WhatsApp group, which is called The Smith Family.**

NEWS WARP

HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

- *X-Men*'s Simon Kinberg to write and produce a new trilogy of **Star Wars** films.
- Daniel Craig reuniting with *Queer* director Luca Guadagnino on DC's **Sgt Rock**.
- Brian K Vaughan writing a remake of '50s classic **Forbidden Planet**.
- Doug Liman and Tom Cruise reteaming on underwater supernatural thriller **Deeper**.
- Denzel Washington set to appear in **Black Panther 3**.

- Ryan Reynolds to bring **Mighty Mouse** to the big screen, with a script by *Scoob!*'s Matt Lieberman.
- Idris Elba in the frame to play Man-at-Arms in live-action **Masters Of The Universe**.
- Eli Roth reveals a **Thanksgiving** sequel begins filming in March.
- *Dune*'s Austin Butler to star in time travel tale **The Barrier**, directed by Edward Berger.
- Finn Wolfhard and Billy Bryk to remake 1999 slacker horror **Idle Hands**.
- Paul King confirms a **Wonka** sequel is in development.
- Celeste O'Connor joining **Scream VII**.
- **Smile 3** set to enter production this year. Put on a happy face...

SHANE ANTHONY SINCLAIR/GETTY

SCI-FACT! Created by Mike Carey and Chris Bachalo, the Children of the Vault first appeared in 2006's *X-Men* 188.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Quantum Leapers

Preview X-events ahead in Marvel's one-shot **Timeslide**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

Cover art for the one-off issue, by Kael Ngu.

WHILE there's been no traversing the centuries since the advent of the *From The Ashes* era, Steve Foxe and Ivan Fiorelli are now exploring the Merry Mutants' days of future past, present and future in *Timeslide*, Marvel's latest end-of-year one-shot (following on from the Avengers-focused *Timeless*).

"I appreciate the other X-teams keeping time travel off the board because we will definitely not be bearing that in mind!" laughs Foxe. "We're doing heavy damage to the time-space continuum here and playing rough and fast – all thanks to the new antagonist Bishop and Cable have been tasked with hunting down and stopping. Far future, distant past, it's all on the table... if it still exists."

They may have reached "an amicable spot" in 2023 miniseries *Children Of The Vault*, but the X-Men's resident time-travelling soldiers have not always seen eye to cybernetic eye.

"They've always had an uneasy relationship, which has oscillated between distrust to outright burning hatred to begrudging respect," says Foxe. "We have 40 pages to play with here and it's a small cast, so Nate and Lucas really get to have an arc with how they see the other over the course of this wide-ranging adventure."

Raised in the confines of the Corridor, the Children of the Vault play a substantial role in what unfolds.

"The Children are endlessly malleable and fascinating and seeing Ivan design our new original Child was a treat," says Foxe, who reveals that we can also expect several other X-folk. "We have cameos as we hop around time, but aside from Tempus, who sets off the events of the book and provides the backbone of the plot, we wanted to really keep the book's cast small and tight, as this is a showcase for Bishop and Cable."

As with *Timeless*, *Timeslide* is "jam-packed with quick flashes of the stories to come" in 2025. "At least one of them is something I'm writing myself, while a bunch of them are stories I know about and readers will learn more about in the coming months," Foxe says. "A few of the teases are scattered throughout the plot, and I suspect readers sometimes won't even know they're being shown a preview until after the fact."

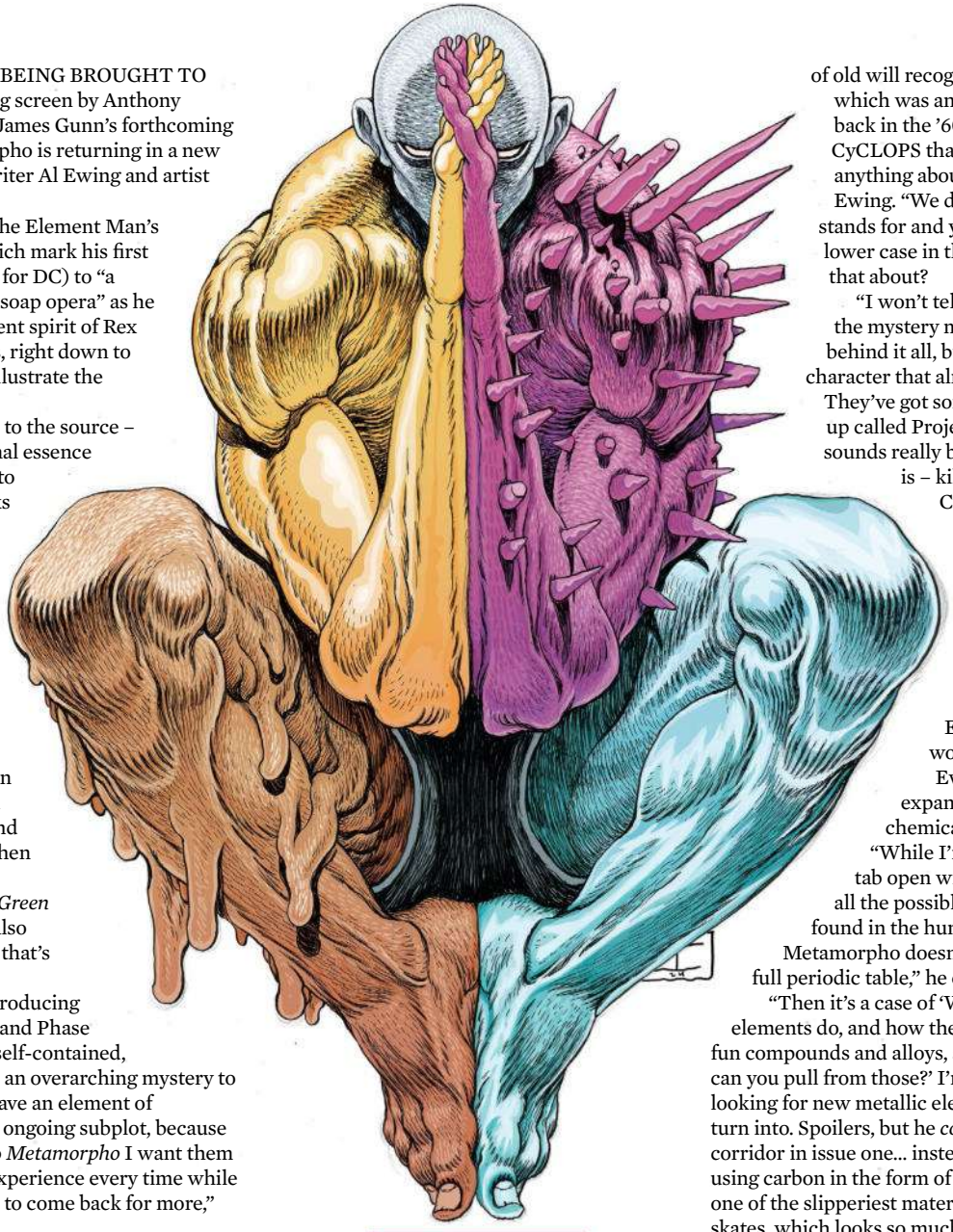
Although *Timeslide* harks back to classic storylines, it isn't just a nostalgic time trip. "As well as glimpses of potential X-futures, you can expect to see iconic moments from X-Men history – but not necessarily how you remember them," continues Foxe.

"What I didn't want to do is turn this into a carousel of family vacation photos. We already know and love those stories but Ivan and I are telling a new story, so we've tried to capture the spirit of iconic past X-Men stories without retreading familiar ground.

"For instance, I love the trope of flashing ahead and seeing a character who's a kid in the modern day all grown up and a fully-fledged member of the main X-Men team, but which kid is it? Buy the book and find out!"

Timeslide is out now.

SCI-FACT! **Metamorpho debuted in 1965's *Brave And The Bold* issue 77, before appearing in his own title.**



WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Chemical Brother

DC's **Element Man** is Metamorpho-sing into a new solo series

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

AHEAD OF BEING BROUGHT TO life on the big screen by Anthony Carrigan in James Gunn's forthcoming *Superman*, Metamorpho is returning in a new monthly series by writer Al Ewing and artist Steve Lieber.

Ewing compares the Element Man's new adventures (which mark his first monthly assignment for DC) to "a superhero sitcom or soap opera" as he emulates the irreverent spirit of Rex Mason's classic titles, right down to the head shots that illustrate the front-page cast list.

"We're going back to the source – channelling the primal essence of the '60s comics into something that works today," Ewing tells Red Alert. "It's not on a pure nostalgia level but it's tickling the same spot.

"I really want this to be the comic you pick up to leave your cares behind you for half an hour as you just chill with Metamorpho and friends, especially when compared to [the upcoming] *Absolute Green Lantern*, which I'm also currently writing, as that's very heavy stuff."

With issue one introducing the sinister Mister 3 and Phase Three, each issue is self-contained, although there's also an overarching mystery to solve. "I wanted to have an element of done-in-one with an ongoing subplot, because when people pick up *Metamorpho* I want them to have a complete experience every time while also being motivated to come back for more," says Ewing.

He teases the ominous threat posed by CyCLOPS and Project Sunrise. "Metamaniacs of old will recognise CyCLOPS, which was an evil organisation back in the '60s, but this is a new CyCLOPS that we don't know anything about," continues Ewing. "We don't know what it stands for and you'll notice the lower case in their name, so what's that about?

"I won't tell you the identity of the mystery mastermind who's behind it all, but it's a DC character that already exists. They've got something coming up called Project Sunrise, which sounds really bad, as the first step is – kill Metamorpho!

CyCLOPS has eyes everywhere and the only people keeping an eye on them is SHADE, which I've brought in as the agency Urania Blackwell – aka Element Gal – works for."

Ewing is also expanding Metamorpho's chemical-based abilities. "While I'm writing I keep a tab open with an article about all the possible elements that are found in the human body, because Metamorpho doesn't have access to the full periodic table," he explains.

"Then it's a case of 'What can these elements do, and how they can combine into fun compounds and alloys, and what shapes can you pull from those?' I'm constantly looking for new metallic elements for him to turn into. Spoilers, but he *could* run down a corridor in issue one... instead, I've got him using carbon in the form of graphene, which is one of the slipperiest materials, to make ice skates, which looks so much cooler!"

Metamorpho: The Element Man is out now.

ACTOR EXCLUSIVE

Running Time

The Fugitive Doctor flees in a series of new audio **Doctor Who** adventures WORDS: **ROBBIE DUNLOP**

BACK IN JANUARY 2020, THE *Doctor Who* story "Fugitive Of The Judoon" sprang the ultimate bait and switch by revealing a "Fugitive" incarnation of the Doctor living as a tour guide in Gloucester.

"It's not wasted on me that I'm part of a very small group of people that have played the Doctor," Jo Martin tells Red Alert, when asked how it feels to portray one of television's most iconic characters. "I grew up watching the show, I was a fan. And I'm now in this big family – you never walk alone. You're part of a bigger thing and it's a wonderful feeing. I absolutely love it. It's a dream come true, I still pinch myself, I kid you not.

"I still think, 'Did that really happen?'" she laughs. "It's one of the best jobs that I've ever done because it's the job that keeps on giving; it's the character that keeps on giving."

The Fugitive Doctor made her audio debut in *Once And Future: Coda – The Final Act* – the latest in a run of Big Finish plays celebrating the series' 60th anniversary and co-starring Jonathon Carley as the War Doctor (originally played by the late John Hurt). Now she's finally venturing solo in *Most Wanted*, a box set of three interlinked stories.

For Martin, reprising the role was a no-brainer. "She's got more to say, she's got more to find out. We dive deep into the character, deeper than we got a chance to on TV because I really only had one whole episode to myself. So being able to really see all dimensions of my Doctor is just a joy."

Further joy stemmed from not having to put on make-up, while the camera-free studio enabled her to stay focused on her acting. "It's so easy to be distracted because there's so much going on when you're filming," she says. "Radio is really stripped back. You're in that booth, you and maybe another actor or two, the director and producer. It's a really freeing experience and I'm able to try stuff out.

Furthermore, she feels like she loses some of her inhibitions on audio. "I would try more things than I got the chance to on film, because

Jo Martin in costume as the Fugitive Doctor.

BEN BLACKALL © BBC STUDIOS

"I grew up watching the show. And I'm now in this big family – you never walk alone"

there's a bit more time, and you don't have to reset a million and one things – 'Oh my god we've got to reset that explosion; we've got to do this; the SA [supporting artist] has to walk by at that point...'

"It's all imagination, so when we get something wrong, or we try something that didn't work, we can go back and do it again in two seconds. We haven't got to wait another 30 minutes to reset everything. It's a lot quicker."

Martin is full of praise for the series' scripts, which she says pose the Fugitive Doctor myriad problems. "She is truly tested, having to find out who she really is and, also, find different ways of escaping, because she's on the run a lot of the time."

Her pursuer, the bounty hunter Cosmo, is played by Alice Krige, best known as the Borg Queen in *Star Trek: First Contact*. Martin remembers Krige as "really, really nice, really funny, playful. She brings a power." So much power, in fact, that when recording one particular scene together, Martin had to stop to regain focus. "I was like, 'I'm not ready, I need to really go into another gear for this!'

"I meet quite a few of my nemeses," she continues. "The Daleks come for me."

One of the villains she'd eventually like to face off with would be the Master, played by Sacha Dhawan. "I thought his Master was the scariest thing. And you know who really scared, me? The statues.

"Weeping Angels!", she exclaims, after a prompt from Red Alert. "Although how do you win against those, my god! I want a nice story with the Weeping Angels."

As for the Doctor's Thirteenth incarnation, Martin would love to see them team up again. However, that day may only come when Jodie Whittaker has time to spare.

"I was talking to Jodie the other day – she has two little ones now so she's super-busy. She's about to start doing a theatre play [*The Duchess Of Malfi*] which I can tell you is not a joke; you're not going to have any time. But I will definitely be going to see the play and I will hopefully buy her a drink afterwards."

In the meantime, *Most Wanted* will offer bounteous rewards for the Fugitive Doctor's extensive fanbase. "I can't wait for you to hear them," Martin says. "It's funny, it's scary, but most of all, it's bloody exciting."

A second set is already in the can – but would she return to the series in either medium further down the line? "I would do both for the rest of my life. When they call, trust me, I'll be there," she concludes, with a grin.

The Fugitive Doctor: Most Wanted is available from Big Finish in January.

SCI-FACT! **Jo Martin's sons only discovered the nature of her role when "Fugitive Of The Judoon" was broadcast.**

NEWS WARP
HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

- Sophie Turner tipped to play Lara Croft in Prime Video's live-action **Tomb Raider**, showrun by Phoebe Waller-Bridge.
- Macaulay Culkin joining the cast of **Fallout** season two as a "crazy genius-type character".
- **Star Wars: Ahsoka** season two rumoured to begin filming in April.
- Netflix to return to the **Cyberpunk** universe with another animated series.
- Courtney B Vance replaces the late Lance Reddick as Zeus in **Percy Jackson And The Olympians** season two. Andra Day joins as Athena.
- South Korean superhero saga **Moving** renewed for a second season on Disney.
- Poorna Jagannathan to play Zoe in DC's **Lanterns**.
- Animated series **Star Wars: Visions** renewed for a nine-part third season.
- Awkwafina, David Harbour, Elizabeth Olsen, Simu Liu, Randall Park, Florence Pugh and Hailee Steinfeld among the voice cast of upcoming animated series **Marvel Zombies**.
- Sing it! Lady Gaga to guest star in season two of **Wednesday**.

STEVE GRANITZ/FILMMAGIC/GETTY

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

Bad Moon Rising

Steven C Miller kicks some lycanthrope ass in **Werewolves**

WORDS: **STEVE O'BRIEN**

WHILE THE PAST FEW YEARS have seen a glut of movies featuring zombies and vampires and mummies, the werewolf seems to be the one classic monster that modern cinema doesn't quite know what to do with.

"It's because they're very difficult to make and to get right," says director Steven C Miller, who hopes to redress the balance with new film *Werewolves*. "So studios, financiers, indie filmmakers, they skew away from them. There's a general consensus that werewolf movies don't make money, but we're trying to buck the trend and do something different."

Different, *Werewolves* certainly is. While most lycanthrope films tend to either be in the gothic horror or black comedy camp, this is as much action movie as fright flick, focusing as it does on an epidemic of werewolfery after the Earth is subjected to a "Supermoon" event.

But though the genre-mashing is new, in other ways *Werewolves* is pleasingly retro, utilising age-old processes to bring its army of creatures to life. For his take, Miller decided early on to eschew CG in favour of practical effects, in the same way as Joe Dante did on *The Howling* or John Landis did in *An American Werewolf In London*.

"I'm an '80s kid at heart so I'm a big practical fan," the director says. "Obviously I knew we were going to have to have *some* CGI, it's impossible not to, but to go 90% practical and really throw these wolves on screen for me was crucial."

So while there is CG in the movie, Miller says he wanted it to complement the practical effects, and that meant making sure the digital work didn't appear as polished as some CG can end up looking.

"The guys that did our CGI were so great," he enthuses. "We modelled the CGI after the

Wesley (Frank Grillo) has evidently come prepared.

Wesley and Amy (Katrina Law) go hunting.

practical werewolf, and so we tried to make it not look clean. That was important for me, with the CGI elements: how can we make it feel like it's my practical werewolves? They're a little bit clunky, and that was how I asked the CGI guys to be.

"That's what the audience is gonna really enjoy – they can really feel the animals on screen, they can feel the beast stand up, they can feel him drool. So those little CGI pieces that we sprinkle into that blends everything together."

Of course, working with practical effects resulted in the shoot being harder than anything Miller had experienced before this. Despite being a veteran of 13 movies, he says *Werewolves*' shoot was the most challenging of his career.

"Action movies are hard in general," he says. "On a scale of one to 10, they're an eight. Then when you add in practical werewolves it's a 10

> **"We modelled the CGI after the practical werewolf, and tried to make it not look clean"**

because there just are so many moving mechanics with the animatronics, wirework, rain, and then you're adding pyrotechnics and explosions... It just becomes massive."

Though there haven't been many action-accented werewolf movies before Miller's, the director did take some influence from its most obvious antecedent.

"I took the broodingness from *Dog Soldiers*," he admits, referencing Neil Marshall's 2002 action-horror, "because I loved how big and muscular and cool the werewolves were, that feeling like these things could rip you apart."

To battle a horde of lycanthropes, you need someone who's larger than life, who the audience trusts can go toe-to-toe with an eight-foot wolfman and walk away unscathed.

Here, that ubermensch is the mighty Frank Grillo, who gives the movie some serious sinew. "He's just got grit, you know," smiles Miller about his leading man. "Frank is one of those guys that is also just super-passionate, and you can feel that on screen. He's got heart to him and that's not always the case with the big action guys. I just lean into that, because ultimately, it's Frank Grillo versus werewolves. I mean, that should have been the title!

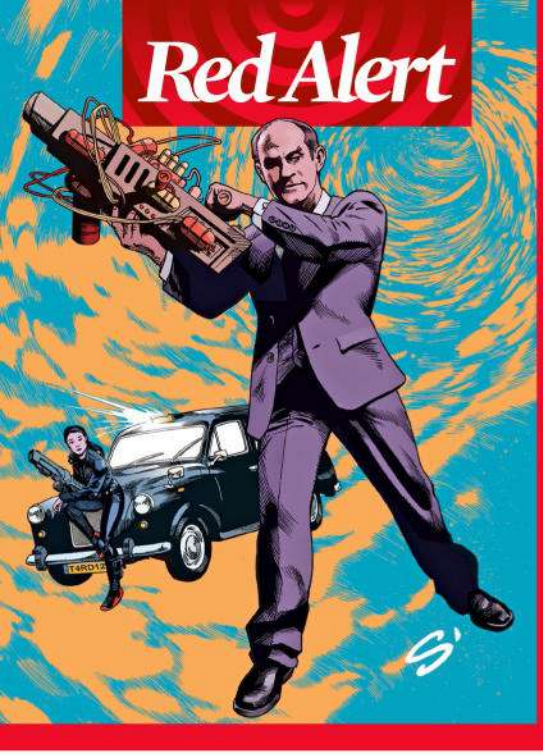
"Something we talked about very early on was I wasn't going to try to change him from being Frank Grillo. I just needed him to bring what he does onto the screen and battle some wolves!"

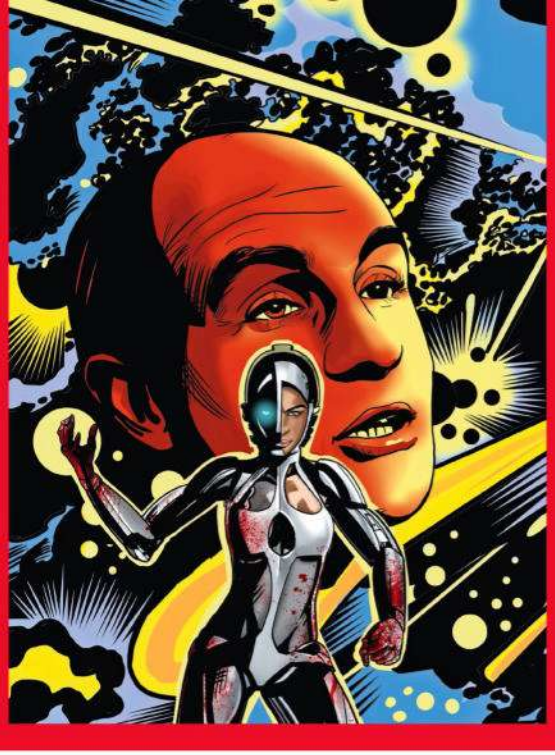
Miller isn't a director who likes to take it easy between movies, and since shooting *Werewolves* has already made another actioner, *Under Fire*. But as regards his next project, he says he'd like to try something he's never attempted before: an action-comedy.

"I love comedy, but action is my jam, so trying to mix those two would be a lot of fun," he beams. "Those are the things that you want to do as a filmmaker, find different genres to put together – that's what I really enjoy."

Werewolves is released on digital platforms on 13 January.

SCI-FACT! **In his previous life as a basketball player, 7' 1" tall werewolf actor Ian Whyte had 80 caps for England.**





AUTHOR EXCLUSIVE

Guardians Of The Galaxy

Cutaway Comics' **Gods And Monsters Phase 2** brings us Drax, Iris Wildthyme and Losko

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

DESIGNED – IN WRITER IAN Winterton's words – as Cutaway Comics' "own little version of the Marvel Cinematic Universe", *Gods And Monsters* reaches its second phase in 2025. There are two new volumes in which the arguably more Earthbound Drax and Iris Wildthyme join godlike beings Sutekh and Omega and Tharil princess Faustine in the cosmic conflict.

"It's not just the settings but the character of Drax himself, who is a Time Lord and an old classmate of the Doctor. He's not particularly special except in terms of fixing things and, as I put it in the comic, regarding Earth – in particular '70s London.

"He's gone native and speaks, as he did in the TV story 'The Armageddon Factor', with a Cockney accent," laughs Winterton, referring to the 1979 Fourth Doctor serial. "1976 London is a pleasingly gritty place, although we don't spend too much time there as Drax gets sent off to a certain nuclear complex in Gloucestershire to battle the remnants of the evil Kastrian warlord Eldrad."

Illustrated respectively by Stephen Scott and Mike Collins, the 76-page graphic novel opens with "London Calling", which follows on from 2022's "Eldrad Must Live!", before Drax encounters "sunshine and cyborgs" in "LA Woman". This came about, Winterton explains, "because [Cutaway publisher] Gareth Kavanagh and I have been attending Gallifrey One in Los Angeles for the past few years, and our pre- and post-convention ritual is to wander around Santa Monica, supping ales. We loved the idea of Drax, a representative of drab '70s Britain, stumbling onto Muscle Beach."

Described as "a galaxy-hopping treasure hunt with intergalactic pirates, reality-ending paradoxes and, at one point, a talking flamingo", writer Sean Mason and artist Libby Reed's Iris Wildthyme comic is anything but down to Earth. "It's like the opening adventure of an Indiana Jones movie," explains Mason.

"It's a complete little story but it introduces some pieces that set up the next adventure. Like Drax, Iris is a bit of a wildcard in this game of gods and monsters, and I can't imagine her having any time for Omega's nonsense."

Iris first appeared in novels by Paul Magrs in the '90s. Mason and Reed have taken their lead for "Partners In Time" from Katy Manning, who played Iris in Big Finish's later audio plays. "Iris is such a fabulous character and this is very much Katy's version of her," says Mason. "Katy was thrilled when she saw the first character sketches. Her only real note was 'Add more jewellery!'"

Also included in the 50-pager is Stephen Gallagher and Mike Collins's "Losko Of The Antonine", which chronicles the origins of the feline warrior, who was first introduced in the author's expanded novelisation of his 1981 TV story "Warriors' Gate".

"Faustine's right there at the start of the rebellion and Losko's further out, where it's yet to reach," teases Gallagher, who is also scripting the upcoming Phase 3, *Fire And Ice*. "But it's coming, as they're both on trajectories where their paths are eventually going to cross."

Iris Wildthyme, as approved by Katy Manning.

Gods And Monsters: Drax, Iris And Losko is out in 2025.

SCI-FACT! **Gallagher didn't name Losko in novelisation *Warriors' Gate And Beyond*. There, he's simply referred to as "the Antonine Killer".**

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Red Menace

Sam Wilson's **Captain America** and the Red Hulk face off in a new miniseries

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

Cover art for issue one, by Taurin Clarke.

IN ADVANCE OF THEIR appearance in February's *Captain America: Brave New World*, the former Falcon turned Sentinel of Liberty and General Thaddeus "Thunderbolt" Ross's Red Hulk are coming to blows in new miniseries *Sam Wilson, Captain America*. Co-written by erstwhile *Hulk* scripter Greg Pak and Evan Narcisse, and illustrated by Eder Messias and Valentine De Landro, the five-parter returns Sam to his social worker roots.

"We talk about street-level superheroes and how relatable they are," Pak tells Red Alert. "Sam may fly high, but he'll always be a kid from the neighbourhood who's always there for the folks on the ground first and foremost."

With the early Captain America also playing a role in *Brave New World*, the first issue opens at Isaiah Bradley's birthday party, tying in with the late Robert Morales and Kyle Baker's classic 2003 series *Truth: Red, White And Black*. "This story is very much about who gets to participate in the American Dream and the larger sociopolitical forces that factor into that participation," explains Narcisse.

Interior art from the first issue.

"They haven't interacted much in the comics, but Sam very much operates in the aura of Isaiah's legacy. Systematic injustice has impacted both of their heroic careers, with people questioning whether they were both worthy to share the mantle and patriotic symbolism of Captain America.

"Isaiah represents the Black American side of what's called the Greatest Generation and the brilliant *Truth: Red, White And Black* dug deep into that prejudice that real life Black soldiers had to endure as they endeavoured to serve their country.

"Sam has fought through echoes of that attitude during his tenure as Captain America and that's made him a different kind of symbol."

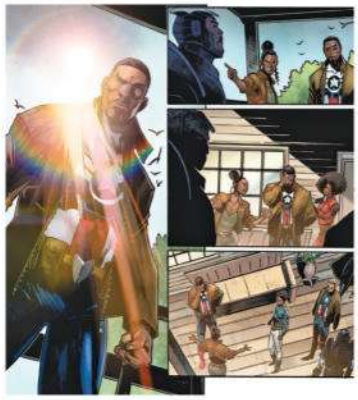
While according to Narcisse "as someone with a storied military service background, Red Hulk is all about duty and loyalty and sees his strength as a tool to embody those ideals," Thunderbolt Ross is motivated by his own vision of the American Dream. "One of the really great things about Marvel's shared universe is that a slew of different creators have explored a bunch of the central characters from different angles," adds Pak.

"The Red Hulks are military men who have retained their loyalty to the military as Hulks. It's a great chance to see how power can be wielded in different ways by people who all think they're doing the right thing.

"I love the way there are multiple Black heroes with different philosophies, agendas and backgrounds who all wear the flag, and you bet we're going to explore that in this book!"

Sam begins by investigating the suspicious opportunities for the disenfranchised provided by a new tech venture, whose head of security is the Red Hulk. "Our cover artist Taurin Clarke has done designs for a very special character we can't reveal just yet," teases Pak. "We're bringing back a long-dormant character from the Captain America mythos with an all-new look..."

Interior art by Eder Messias and Valentine De Landro.



Sam Wilson, Captain America issue one is out on 1 January.

SCI-FACT! **Debuting in 1962's *The Incredible Hulk* issue one, Thunderbolt Ross was transformed into the Red Hulk in 2008's *Hulk* issue one.**

SCI-FACT! **Published under the now defunct younger readers imprint Star Comics, Marvel's *SilverHawks* series ran for seven issues in 1986.**

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Space Precinct

Dynamite Entertainment takes **SilverHawks** under its wing with a new comic series

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

ED BRISSON GREW up watching *SilverHawks* "every day at 4.30pm, right after *ThunderCats*", and describes it as "*The Untouchables* in space". Now he's scripting the future cops' new comic, the latest in Dynamite Entertainment's Warner Bros Discovery Animation line, which began with *ThunderCats* in early 2024.

Set just before the television show, which ran for a single season in 1986, Brisson's take expands on how Commander Stargazer postponed his retirement to track down mob boss Mon*Star after he escapes from Penal Planet 10.

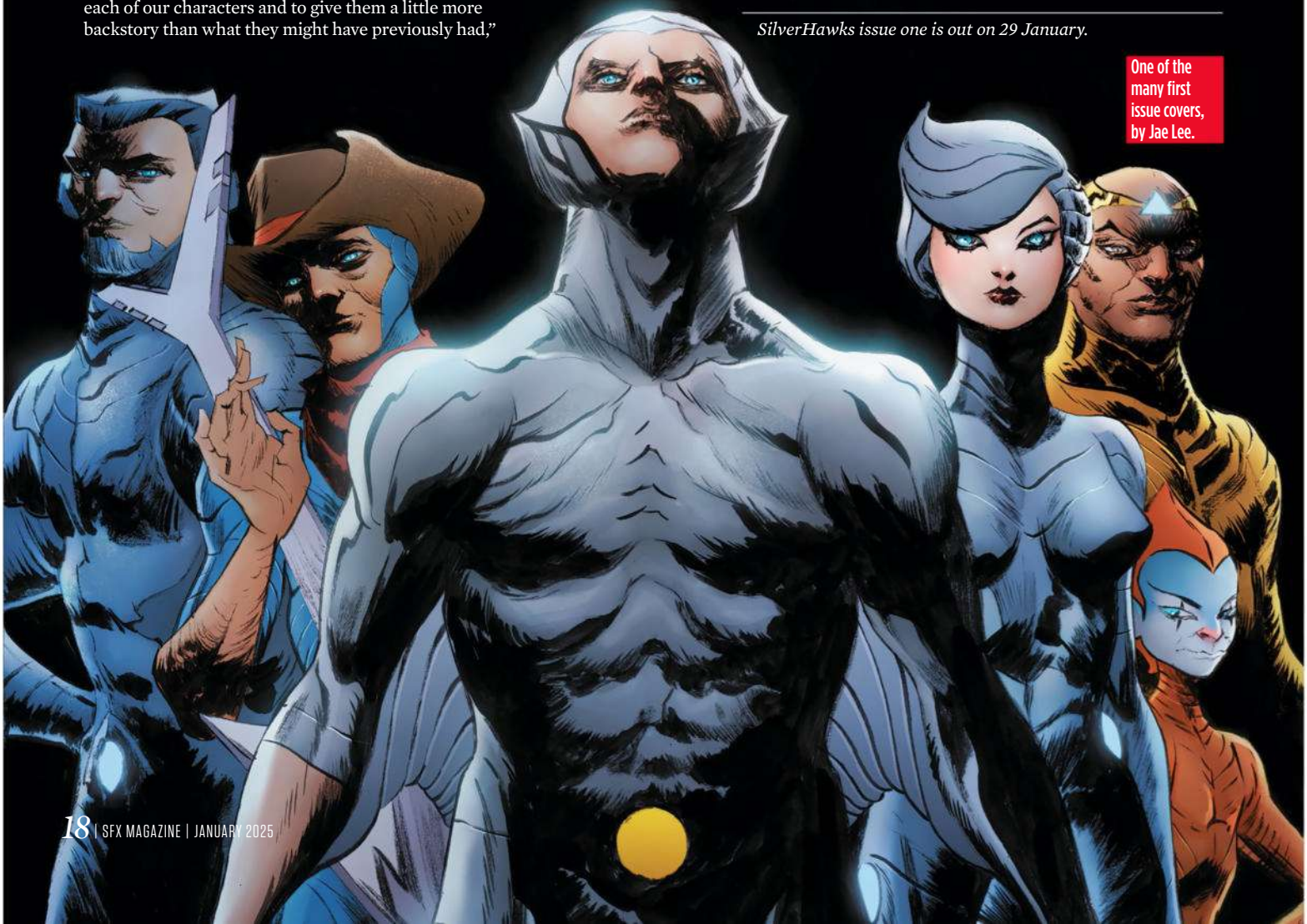
"Where we deviate from the cartoon is how the team comes together," Brisson tells Red Alert. "In the TV series, the team was selected and we got a 10-second blurb on who each member is before they're on the team. In the comic, we're going to show how each of them has been impacted by Mon*Star and his crime syndicate. We're going to dig a little deeper into who they are and why it is that they'd volunteer to have their bodies manipulated and mostly replaced with circuitry and steel."

With a line-up composed of Quicksilver, Bluegrass, Steelwill, Steelheart and Copper Kidd, the team slowly comes together over the course of the first few issues. "It gives us the time to introduce each of our characters and to give them a little more backstory than what they might have previously had," explains Brisson, who will also be including Hotwing. "He was a late addition in the cartoon but I have an approach that made it feel more organic to bring him in earlier. We're also bringing in Condor early, and there'll also be a few new characters from Stargazer and Condor's past, who will play a big role in helping to establish and train our SilverHawks."

However, the SilverHawks' avian partners, the Fighting Hawks, are initially conspicuous by their absence. "Quicksilver's Fighting Hawk Tally-Hawk is going to be involved pretty early on, but we're already introducing a lot of characters between the SilverHawks, Mon*Star's cartel and all of the new supporting cast," says Brisson. "I don't want to flood readers with all of the Fighting Hawks right out of the gate, so as it makes sense to roll them into the story, we will."

Like Brisson, artist George Kambadais is also a big fan of *SilverHawks*. "He injects that feeling into his work and you can feel it on the page," says Brisson. "His work is vibrant and crackling with energy and is a perfect match for the futuristic, shiny vibe of the cartoon. We're going to have a lot of fun, big, action set-pieces as well as a lot of grounded moments with the team and George is a deft hand at both, and he brings a real emotion when called for."

SilverHawks issue one is out on 29 January.



One of the many first issue covers, by Jae Lee.

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Children Of The Atom

New Justice League series **The Atom Project** is going to blow you away!

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

(Below) Cover art for the first issue, by Mike Perkins.

WHILE HEAVY HITTERS SUCH AS Batman, Superman, the Flash and Wonder Woman are now teaming up for the first time in several years in *Justice League Unlimited*, *Justice League: The Atom Project* focuses on some of DC's lesser-known – and in the case of Ray Palmer and Ryan Choi, literally smaller – heroes. Co-written by John Ridley and Ryan Parrott and illustrated by Mike Perkins, the six-issue series has been described as "*24* meets *Oppenheimer*," as it pits the two Atoms against a renegade and highly unstable Captain Atom.

"Despite the *Oppenheimer* connection, we didn't want it just to be the Atom sitting in a lab, so we were like, 'How do we get this off the Watchtower and make it more interesting?'" laughs Parrott, referring to the Justice League's new orbiting headquarters. "That's when we came up with the idea of having two different timelines, which allowed us to bring in an espionage element as in *The Day Of The Jackal* or *The Fugitive*."

"For me, as I do so much shadowy, atmospheric stuff, it's been nice to just do some superheroes, although this isn't entirely a superhero book as it's also like a spy thriller," continues Perkins. "You've got Ray and Ryan interacting with each but going in different directions, so there's friction between them."

With Parrott stressing that "they're not like Batman and Robin as they're both the Atom," the two shrinking scientists confront a de-powered Captain Atom, with potentially explosive results.

"Captain Atom has been stripped of his powers, which makes him more human as he has to find his place in the world," he explains. "Ray and Ryan aren't necessarily fighting over him but they're trying to manipulate the situation, although I've probably already said too much!

"There's a really interesting triangle at the centre of the book as these two guys have to come together, and then it becomes like a team book and has some interesting ripples through all the other books."

Indeed, the events of *The Atom Project* cross over not only with *Justice League Unlimited* but also DC's other post-*Absolute Power* new releases, including *Challengers Of The Unknown*. "There are definitely things in *Justice League Unlimited* that affect our book and actual scenes and characters that are integral to what we're doing," teases Parrott.

"We're working hand in glove with *Justice League Unlimited* and the other books, which is both fun and scary as they're all interconnected and are very intertwined."

Captain Atom was later famously the template for *Watchmen*'s Doctor Manhattan. Perkins has long appreciated Captain Atom's striking visual appearance, first discovering Cary Bates, Greg Weisman and Pat Broderick's 1987 post-*Crisis On Infinite Earths* revision of the character at the age of 15.

"I've reflected that in the cover for *The Atom Project* issue two, which has this Bill Sienkiewicz-style unrestrained energy to it," he says. "Then you have Ray and Ryan coming up against this unrestrained energy, which is the impetus of the story, so it's been fun to play with stuff like that."

Justice League: The Atom Project issue one is out on 1 January.

SCI-FACT! **Other Atoms include 1940 Golden Age incarnation Al Pratt and the 853rd Century's Atom One Million.**

Kenneth Johnson gets a taste of his own medicine.

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

V: Resurrected And Relo

V creator Kenneth Johnson reveals that he's been very hands-on for Big Finish's new audio

LOCK UP YOUR GUINEA PIGS. Forty-two years after alien invasion epic *V* became one of the biggest events in TV history, they're back, in a new audio adaptation of the original miniseries from Big Finish.

But if the fact that the story's been moved to the UK rings alarm bells, have no fear about its authenticity. The original series' creator, Kenneth Johnson, who also crafted *The Bionic Woman*, *The Incredible Hulk* and *Alien Nation* for TV, not only assures us that he's given it his blessing, but that he's been very hands-on. "I was approached by Big Finish, and they said, 'You know, we do this audio stuff.' I said, 'Really? There's a market for that?' They said, 'Yeah – how about letting us having a go at *V*?'" recalls the remarkably sprightly 81-year-old, speaking to Red Alert from his memorabilia-packed studio.

Initially, Johnson was reticent, having been unimpressed with the way previous remakes of his shows had been handled. He even had a major falling out with Warner Bros over the making of the *V* sequel series *The Final Battle*, which saw him walking away from the franchise he created. But when it comes to *V* adaptations not made for TV, he remains in the driving seat. "If you're the sole writer on a project and nobody else had any input on the original creation of it, you are accorded what is called Separated Rights. This means the people who bought the TV rights – in this case Warners – they own the TV rights, while all the other rights fall to me." (He reveals that

> **"For the first six episodes, they stayed very, very close to what I had envisioned"**

cated

remake **V: UK** WORDS: **DAVE GOLDER**

Series star Jack Myers also isn't faring so well...

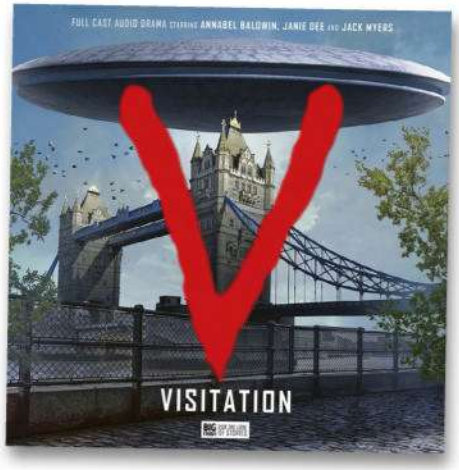
he's even had Vegas casinos enquire about *V*-themed slot machines.)

Big Finish offered Johnson the one thing he craves the most. "They assured me that I would be able to maintain creative control over the project in terms of its quality and in terms of the way that it was proceeding."

He's very enthusiastic about how the collaboration has panned out, even if he had some concerns at first about how such a visual show – remembered fondly for its miles-wide spaceships hovering over world landmarks and rodent ingestion – could transfer to an audio-only medium. "But they really convinced me about how they had been able to do it with other projects. I heard some of the work they'd done on *Doctor Who* and I thought, 'Okay, this is kind of interesting.'

"The project's producer, Jonathan Morris, has proven to be just the best kind of collaborator I could be working with. Because he's been really, really respectful and understanding of what I was trying to accomplish in the original miniseries.

"Since it's a British product and they're making it and selling it primarily in Britain, naturally they wanted to have it set in the UK. That wasn't a problem for me."



There are plans for 12 episodes over four box sets, if sales go well. "For the first six episodes, they stayed very, very close to what I had originally envisioned," says Johnson. After that, "They're going to begin to create their own storylines and explore some areas that I didn't have time to explore originally, but it still all filters back through me.

"There have been ideas that Jonathan and his writers have brought up where I have been really startled and delighted because they hit on something that I hadn't thought of. There were a couple of characters where they said, 'Do we really need them? Can we kill them off?' and I said, 'You can, but you're missing an opportunity if you do that, and here's the opportunities you're missing.' It's always important to realise the ripple effect of making a change."

The reason a movie version hasn't happened yet is that Johnson's a man of principle. "My wife really put it in perspective. She said, 'Would you rather the movie never got made than got made wrong by the wrong people?' and the answer is yes.

"When I first discovered that I really did have the motion picture rights, I suddenly had a lot of new best friends. All the studios came after me and wanted to buy the rights for a whole lot of money. They'd let me produce – absolutely. Probably let me write. But for a director, they were thinking somebody like Michael Bay. And I said, 'No, no, no!'

"Here's what happens when you say no in Hollywood. They go, 'Okay, we understand. How much money do you really want?' They don't get it. It's about me protecting my creation. I decided I'd rather try to do it through independent financing." ●

The first three-episode box set of V: UK will be released in January.

SCI-FACT! ***Babylon 5*'s J Michael Straczynski worked on a *V* reboot in 1989, *V: The Next Chapter*. It was deemed too expensive to produce.**

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Ice Wide Open

The Rig returns, cranking up the action and plunging into the deep WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

"I WANTED A SHOW THAT PEOPLE would be desperate to come back to," smiles David Macpherson, the man who unleashed the scale 12 tsunami that delivered such a cataclysmically cliffhanging finale to season one of *The Rig*.

"Since then that's the question that everyone who's watched the show always asks me: 'Where are they going?' It's fun to be able to finally reveal that."

A hit for Prime Video when it debuted in January 2023, Macpherson's horror-tinged eco-thriller pitted a crew of offshore rig workers against a mysterious, invasive force. This entity was ultimately revealed as the Ancestor – a primordial organism embedded in the North Sea, woken by the actions of rapacious energy company Pictor.

As a catastrophic flood was triggered, the closing moments of the final episode saw the survivors of Kinloch Bravo taken by helicopter to a destination unknown. "My aim with series two was always to make it bigger," Macpherson tells Red Alert. "Because series one completely takes place in the one location, on the rig, I really wanted to expand this world and show lots of different environments and exciting places that are full of danger and mystery. I very much felt series one was about the sins of the past, both in a world view but also for our characters. A lot of them were dealing with traumas from their past, whereas series two is much more about looking towards the future, and the fight for the future.

Rose (Emily Hampshire) and Magnus (Iain Glen).

"Not to steal too much from James Cameron, but it's a bit like *Alien/Aliens*. Series two is more action-driven and there are more stunts. We've got guns this time! But there is still mystery and awe and strange things going on as well."

The crew has been forcefully relocated to the Arctic Circle and a secret facility known as the Stac, where Pictor intends to mine the

Red Alert

> **Series two is more action-driven and there are more stunts. We've got guns this time!**

ocean floor for rare metals. As they prepare to enter the abyssal plain, "the last unexplored ecosystem on the planet", they place themselves on the home turf of the Ancestor itself, 45,000 metres down in the oceanic dark.

"We're in its environment, and so it's much more powerful," shares Macpherson. "It's protecting its home.

"The Arctic was something I really wanted to do. I'm a big Arctic exploration fan, the history of all that, and John Carpenter's *The Thing* is such an important film to me. I always thought I'd love to do something in that environment."

The shift in location doesn't just offer a striking new backdrop. "I really want our show to be about the moment we're living in right now. That's why it's set in contemporary times. It's not in the past, it's not in a dystopian future.

"It's speaking to the moment of now and the Arctic gives us many elements of that. It's a dramatic place to be anyway, but it's also on the frontline of climate change. It's a frontline in geopolitics as well."

Joining returning cast members Iain Glen, Owen Teale and Martin Compston is *Star Trek: First Contact*'s Alice Krige as Morgan Lennox, Pictor CEO and mentor to Rose (Emily Hampshire). "I'm so excited to have Alice there," grins Macpherson. "I'm a big *First Contact* fan.

"I meet the cast as we're preparing the shoot and I nearly went to our meeting wearing my Starfleet Academy T-shirt until I realised that's probably going too far for a first meeting! So I held back the fan in me and was the professional David instead, but inside I was very much geeking out!

"We wanted an actor who had the gravitas and presence that could embody being the boss of an oil company, but also have that humanity in her, and gentleness. We have a lot of fun playing the more shadowy side of her nature. To get to that position you've got to have a bit of darkness in you as well.

"We wanted somebody who could embody all of that and Alice did it brilliantly. She's also quite interested in the environment and nature, so she brought a lot of her knowledge to it as well."

Imminent eco-apocalypse aside, what are the chances of a third season? "I feel like I've got a really strong idea for where we're going to take it next. So I'm certainly very keen to keep going, as are our cast and crew. I really want to keep pushing the envelope, make it bigger, continue the ambition and I feel like I've got a very good plan for how we would do that again.

"It was a challenge to make this series but it really delivers. So I'm hopeful it'll connect with sci-fi fans worldwide."

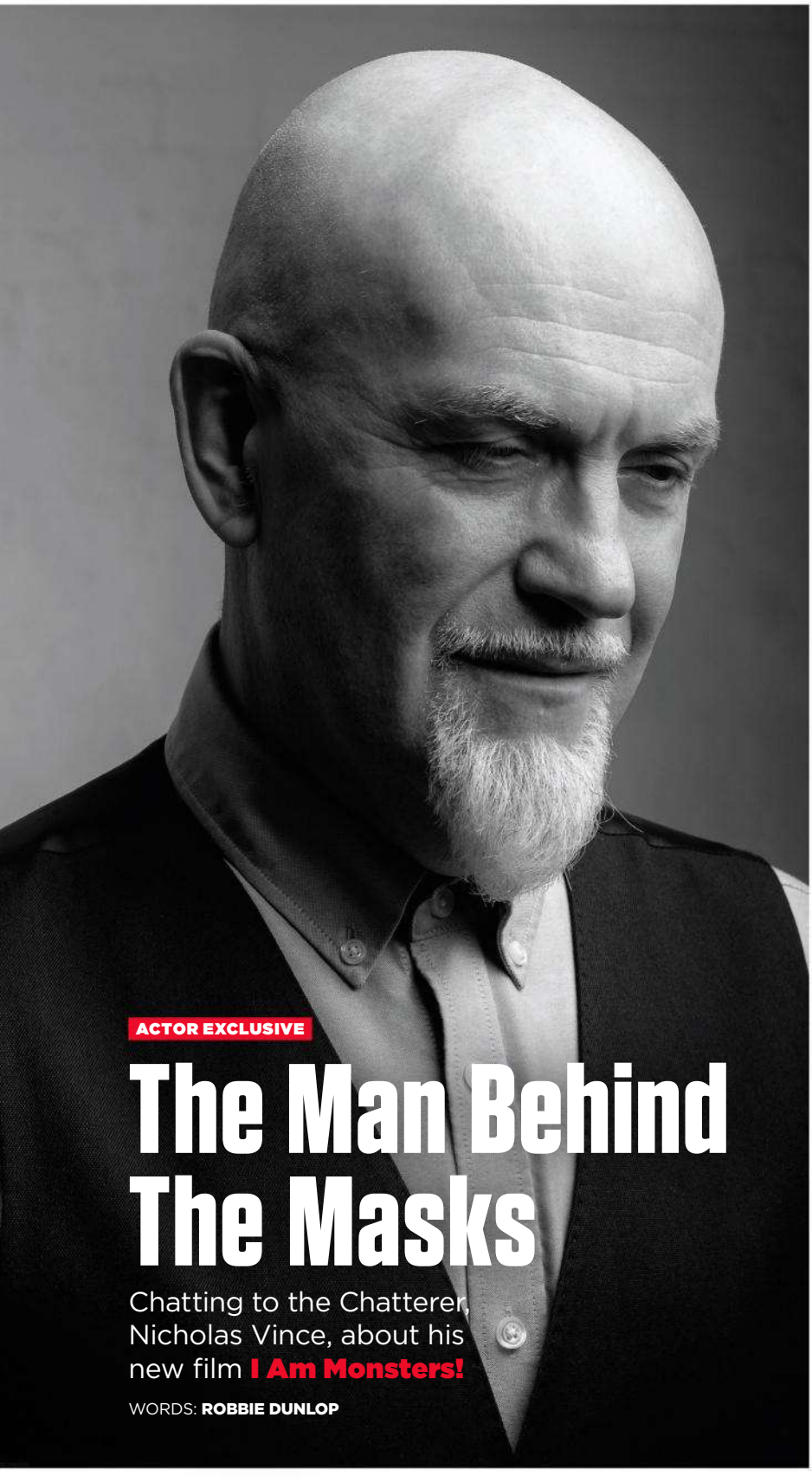
The Rig is on Prime Video from 3 January.

Martin Compston is back as Fulmer.

Alice Krige joins the cast as Morgan.

SCI-FACT! **For season two the VFX team precisely modelled the St Jonsfjorden fjord in Svalbard.**

SCI-FACT! The Chatterer's origins were revealed in "Prayers For Desire", a short comic book story written by Vince and illustrated by Barker.



ACTOR EXCLUSIVE

The Man Behind The Masks

Chatting to the Chatterer, Nicholas Vince, about his new film **I Am Monsters!**

WORDS: **ROBBIE DUNLOP**

BEST KNOWN FOR PLAYING THE CENOBITE called Chatterer, Nicholas Vince took full advantage of the new possibilities on offer when adapting his biographical one-man show *I Am Monsters!* for film.

"There are moments where it's literally just me talking to the camera, telling a story, and there are moments where we use animation," he tells Red Alert. "We did a sequence in stop-motion, which I think is very effective. It was one of the things that excited me about the idea of moving away from the stage and to think of this as a film."

Shot in part before a live audience, it sees Vince speaking openly about his life in horror. From his passion for ghost stories and the films of Vincent Price, he descends into deeply personal recollections of the childhood bullying he endured over his misaligned jaw, before recounting stories from the sets of *Hellraiser*, *Hellbound* and *Nightbreed*.

"The whole ethos behind the title is of me not just being a monster in film, but being a monster in real life," he says. "You hear the word bandied around a lot when you're talking about people on the other side of a political divide, or people who do monstrous things.

"Growing up gay in the '80s was tough. It was really tough. Thatcher's government demonised gay people; you see it today with trans people. It's exactly the same playbook that we went through with Section 28, which outlawed the teaching of homosexuality in state schools.

"I wanted to talk about that as well. Not to say to gay people now that we have it tougher, but actually, apart from anything else, as a warning. Listen, this is what it was like then, watch out because people will always demonise other people if they think they can gain political power.

"But also," he continues, "I've done stupid and selfish things in my life which have led me to behave badly, in a 'monstrous' way. I wanted to be very honest about that."

JAW-DROPPING

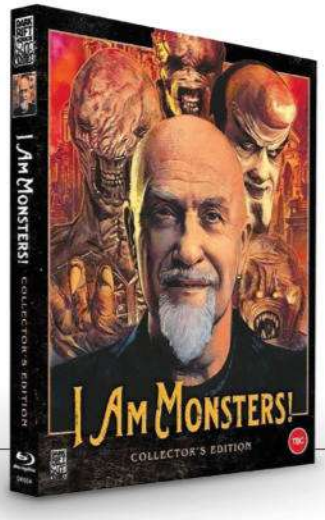
In the stage production, Vince recounted how *Hellraiser* creator Clive Barker took inspiration for the Chatterer Cenobite's severely mutilated face from a surgical operation he underwent at the age of 19 to reposition his jaw.

"When I was doing research for the film, I discovered the operation is called Le Fort [osteotomy], after the surgeon who created the procedure in the 19th century. I talked about sawing my jaw. In fact, it's amazing how easy it is to detach different parts of your jaw."

With aid from an animated step-by-step guide, Vince describes the procedure in graphic detail. "I've been in audiences where they give a sharp intake of breath as they realise exactly what was going on. You get to really understand what was going on and why my face is the way it is."

Vince says that Barker has been incredibly supportive of *I Am Monsters!*. "Of course, a lot of the stories I tell are about Clive and how we created the Chatterer. He's one of my closest friends and I am incredibly grateful to him."

I Am Monsters! is available from darkrifthorror.com.



The War Games In Colour. Isn't technology amazing?

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SFX

SPACE AND TIME

NEWS FROM THE WORLD OF DOCTOR WHO

◆ The anniversary of *Doctor Who* was celebrated on 23 November 2024 via a watch party of "Boom" with commentary from Steven Moffat on Twitter/X. In addition, a new series of podcast *New To Who*, hosted by Tyrell Charles, was announced.

◆ ***The War Games In Colour*, a 90-minute edit of the 1969 story with new music and effects, was shown on BBC Four on 23 December and is available on iPlayer. Also available: *Doctor Who At The Proms*.**

◆ Casio and BBC Studios teamed up to release limited edition packaging for the "iconic gold A159" watch. The Christmas-themed box sleeve also came with a Time Hotel keycard and a TARDIS pin badge (see above).

◆ **New books coming in 2025 include: *The Official Doctor Who Puzzle Book: 150 Timey-Wimey Brainteasers To Test Your Wits* by Simon Fox on 24 April, hardback novel *Spectral Scream* by Hannah Fergesen on 29 May, *The Official Doctor Who Colouring Book* by Mike Collins on 12 June and *Doctor Who: Where's The Doctor? Third Edition*, due on 19 July.**

◆ The Puffin Classics *Who* crossovers continue with *Frankenstein And The Patchwork Man* (Ninth Doctor) by Jack Heath on 24 April and *Dracula* (First Doctor) by Paul Magrs on 28 August.

◆ **New audio books coming in 2025 include *Agent Of The Daleks* by Steve Lyons, read by Maureen O'Brien, on 6 March, and *Doctor Who: The Cloud Exiles & Other Stories*, featuring material from the official annuals on 3 April. *The Third Earth Adventures Collection*, containing readings of five Target novels, is out now.**

◆ The standard edition of *The Collection: Season Nine* is released on 3 February.

◆ **A new version of the sonic screwdriver, as seen in Christmas special "Joy To The World", is now available from Character Options. Also released in December were two new figure sets exclusive to B&M: Friends & Foes Of The Doctor and History Of The Daleks #19.**

◆ An auction to benefit Children In Need will take place early in 2025 via Propstore. There will be around 150 lots, with costumes and props coming direct from BBC Studios. Some of the items up for grabs include a Weeping Angel statue, a Sea Devil costume and head, plus outfits worn by various Doctors. Visit propstoreauction.com.

◆ **New Big Finish releases recently announced include: *Classic Doctors New Monsters: Faithful Friends*, available in January, *The War Master: His Greatest Trick* (released October 2025) and *Deeds Without Names* (October 2026).**

Doctor Who is on BBC iPlayer (UK) and Disney+ (globally).

SCI-FACT! **Kylie Minogue's Astrid Peth costume from "Voyage Of The Damned" recently sold for £12,500 in aid of Children In Need.**

SCI-FACT! **Colin Chilvers turned down *Raiders Of The Lost Ark* in favour of Disney's *Condorman*.**

THE FINAL FRONTIER

COLIN CHILVERS 1945-2024

The man who took Superman up, up and away

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

Legendary tagline "You'll believe a man can fly" was as much a challenge to *Superman*'s fiercely inventive effects team as a promise to the audience. "That was the big nut to crack," admitted Colin Chilvers, who shared both an Oscar and a BAFTA as part of the team on 1978's gravity-defying blockbuster.

Born in London, he studied engineering and industrial design at Hornsey College of Art. After a brief, uncredited stint in the art department of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) he joined as a special effects assistant on *The Battle Of Britain* (1969). Chilvers went on to supervise the effects on Ken Russell's outlandish 1975 rock opera *Tommy* as well as cult hit *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* the same year.

Christopher Reeve in *Superman*.

On *Superman* he worked on such set-pieces as the destruction of Krypton and the Man of Steel's showstopping rescue of Lois Lane from the roof of the Daily Planet building. "You have to remember, the industry was decades away from the special effects that we have today," he said in 2019. "There were no computers, no CGI, no digital effects. Everything we did back then, we had to improvise. And the whole world was watching."

Chilvers also worked on *Superman II* (1980) and *III* (1983). Other genre credits include *Sinbad And The Eye Of The Tiger* (1977), *Saturn 3* (1980) and *Clash Of The Titans* (1981), for which he created the mechanical owl, Bubo. He later served as special effects coordinator on *Bride Of Chucky* (1998) and *X-Men* (2000).

As a director he helmed five episodes of the *Superboy* TV show but won serious recognition for Michael Jackson's "Smooth Criminal" promo, part of 1988's *Moonwalker* movie. The video saw Jackson lean at a seemingly impossible angle – an illusion Chilvers happily admitted was accomplished with the simple use of piano wire.

WARNER BROS/DC COMICS/KOBAL/SHUTTERSTOCK

TONY TODD 1954-2024

American actor known for playing the titular role in *Candyman*, and Worf's brother Kurn.

GREG HILDEBRANDT 1939-2024

Prolific fantasy artist who with brother Tim created the UK poster for *Star Wars*.

NEW AUTHOR

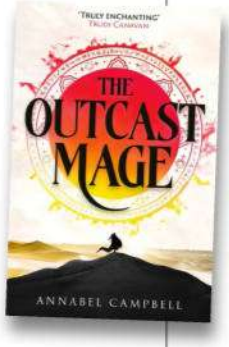
ANNABEL CAMPBELL

MEET THE MEDICAL WRITER BEHIND EPIC FANTASY *THE OUTCAST MAGE*

Tell us about your protagonist.
→ Naila grew up magicless in the magical city of Amoria, until her power was discovered and she was forced to join Amoria's academy of magic. She's never been able to access her magic, but if she cannot learn to control her power, it could destroy her and everything she cares about.

Did anything in particular spark the idea?
→ The glass roof over the round reading room in London sparked the idea for Amoria, a city encased in glass. *Avatar: The Last Airbender* definitely influenced how I depict elemental magic.

How long did it take to write?
→ Embarrassingly, I started this book when I was 14, but it's not really the same book; I left the story sitting for a long time before I came back to it, and only the core remained. The characters grew up with me – they have a lot more trauma now!



Is research necessary for a book like this?
→ You can make up a lot, but research is still important. It should feel grounded in reality. There's a lot of Middle Eastern influence in this book, which I researched with my Arabic husband. We also used a sensitivity reader, which is really important.

Any advice for *SFX* readers who are budding authors?
→ Take yourself and your writing seriously! Make time for your writing. Prioritise it when you can and believe that it's worth doing.

The Outcast Mage is out on 28 January, published by Orbit.

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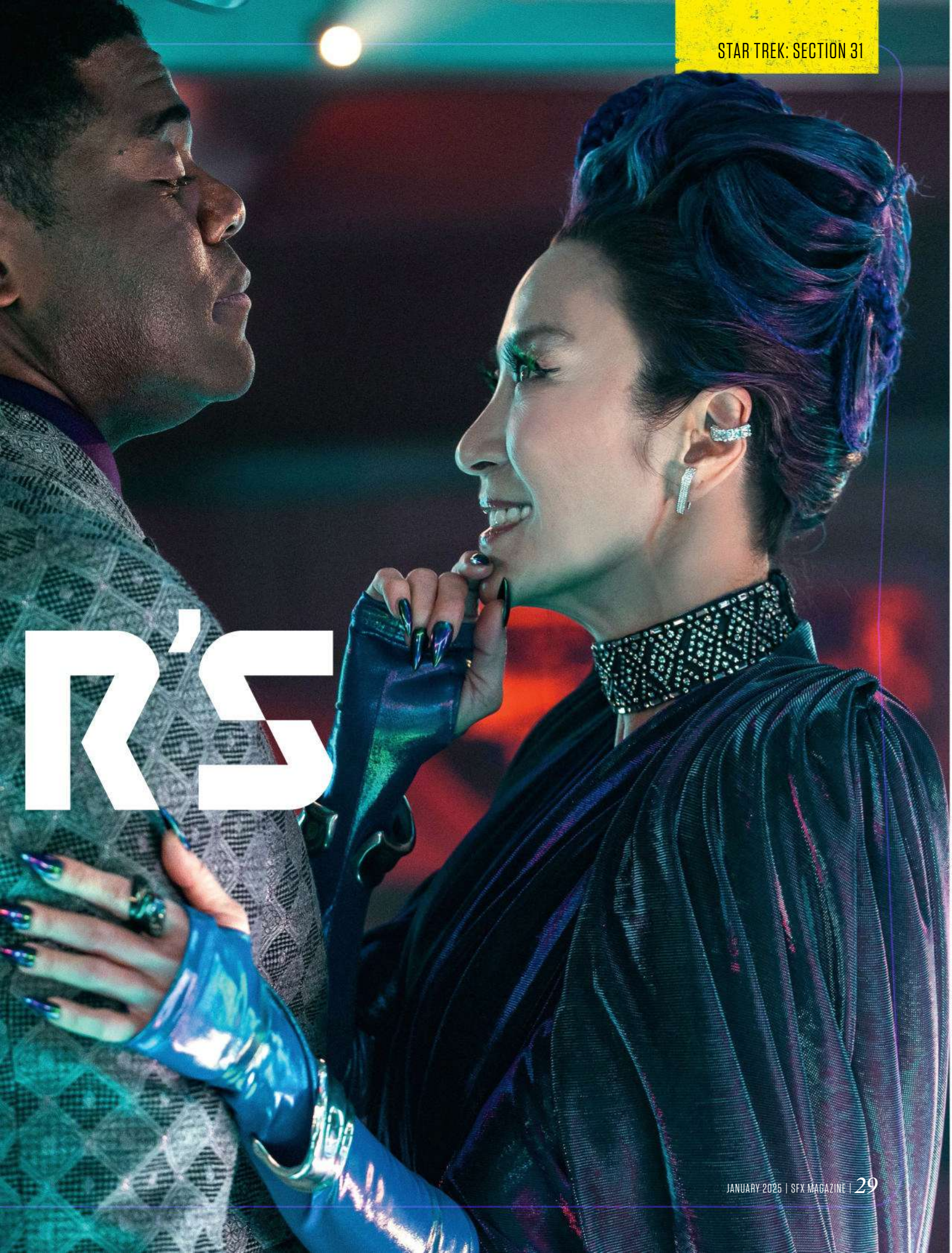
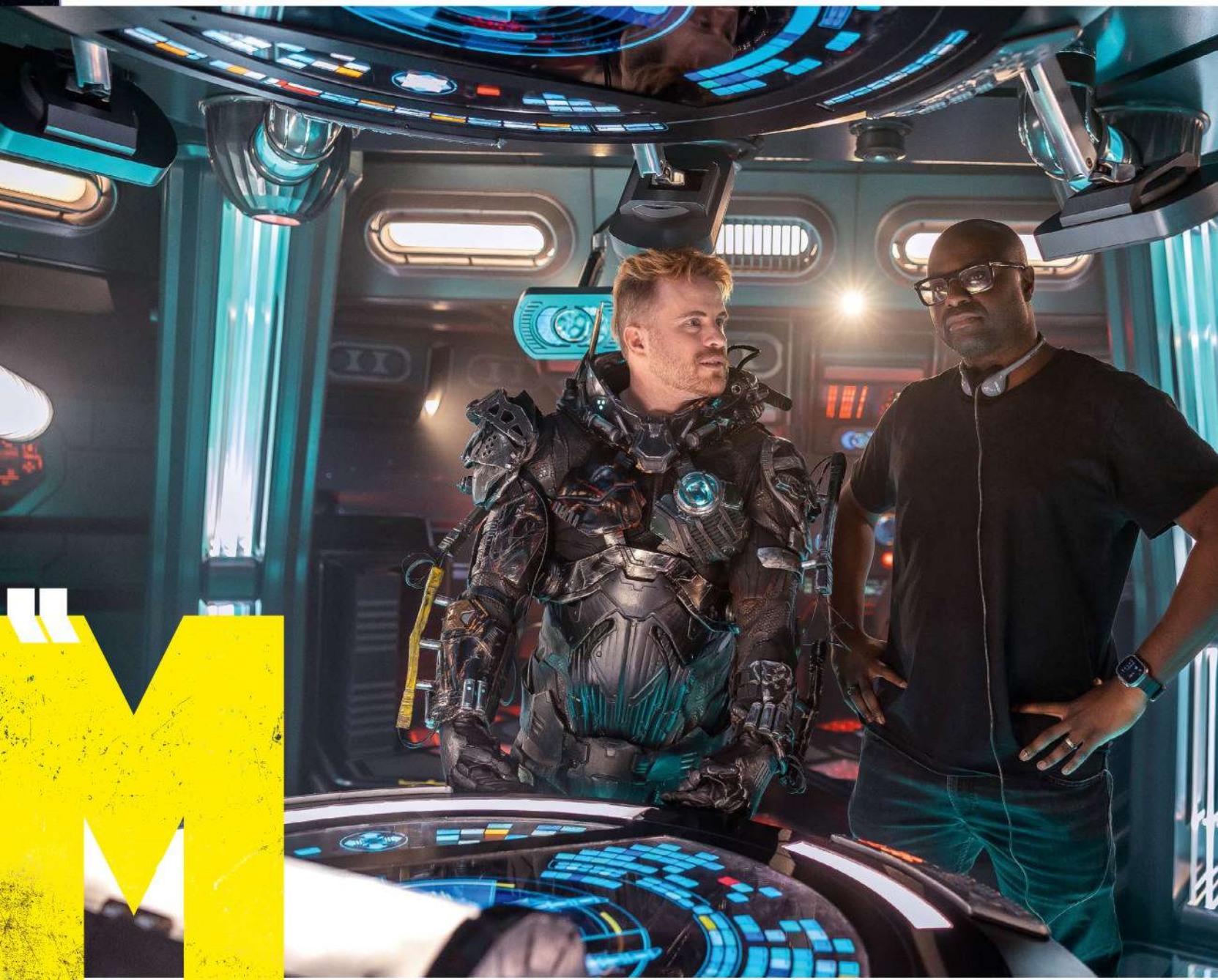
THE EMPERO NEW GROOVE

THE FEDERATION'S HIDDEN DIVISION STEPS INTO THE SPOTLIGHT AS *STAR TREK*'S 14TH MOVIE – **SECTION 31** – BEAMS DOWN THIS MONTH

WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**





"MICHELLE WAS the force behind the movie," director and executive producer Olatunde Osunsanmi says of the new television event film, *Star Trek: Section 31*. The Michelle in question is, of course, Academy Award-winning Michelle Yeoh, reprising her role as Emperor Philippa Georgiou from *Star Trek: Discovery*.

The movie is a new direction for the *Star Trek* franchise – focusing on the secret division of Starfleet – that barely lets up on the action for the full running time, as well as giving an insight into the early life of the former emperor of the Terran Empire from the Mirror Universe.

While it does still feel like *Star Trek*, it also feels exciting in a way that it opens doors for the franchise to evolve further still.

"It was quite the challenge to create something fresh, yet keep it the *Star Trek* that we all grew up with and love, to expand the universe a little bit, particularly with Section 31 and still keep it *Star Trek*," Osunsanmi admits.

When *SFX* catches up with Osunsanmi he's in his Toronto office, which they affectionately call "Star Trek City" – concept art for upcoming series *Starfleet Academy*, on which he's the producing director, adorns the walls.

It's these offices where the current rebirth of the sci-fi franchise began. Everything since *Discovery*, which launched in 2017, has been built on that "machinery", he explains.

"Whether that be just the processes by which we create sets, pre-visualise sets, from concept all the way to building. Or, if it's as mundane as we take the *Discovery* set and turn that over to the Terran Empire. Or take the Federation HQ set and turn that over to the interior Section 31 outpost safe house, and doing that saves us millions of dollars and allows us to make something even bigger," he says.

"But doing that also allows us to really use our creativity. We build it faster, and it allows us to use our creativity to add even more detail than we ordinarily would have been able to, because this group of people here that do these movies have an unbelievable base of wisdom now on how to do it.

"Every time we add somebody new to the equation, like a new production designer or a new DP, we get something fresh, and we just get more and more and something a little bit different. So it's been a wonderful experience."

Osunsanmi with Sam Richardson as Quasi.

Rob Kazinsky as Zeph with director Olatunde Osunsanmi.

Michelle Yeoh menaces as Philippa Georgiou.

“The wonderful thing about doing a movie is it’s a sprint. It’s not a marathon”

Section 31’s journey has been around since filming first began on *Discovery*, with Yeoh suggesting to then-executive producer Alex Kurtzman that she’d love to head-up a series starring Georgiou.

Since then it’s taken different forms, been delayed for various reasons and will ultimately arrive as *Star Trek*’s first “television event movie” later this month on Paramount+ after originally being envisioned as another series.

“I would say the only two things that are the same from the original series pilot to the movie that we’ve got now is that there is a character named Alok and Philippa Georgiou,” Osunsanmi offers.

“It has been retooled so much, the two stories are completely unrecognisable, and Craig Sweeny, the writer, has been in the middle of that [for] the whole process. He’s been in a situation to have written – I think – seven different iterations of this.

“When I say seven different iterations, the first iteration was six episodes of the first season of *Section 31*. The second iteration was another five episodes of *Section 31* which were completely different than the previous iteration.

“Then the fourth, fifth and sixth were multiple pilots that were outlines, then we had the movie, and the movie itself went through a couple of iterations.

“So you have a writer that went through a lot along with Alex Kurtzman, who was in the middle of it with him, and it was quite a journey. Here I am tracking all this and wondering, ‘Where are we going to end up in the end?’ I think where we ended up was wonderful, because we never would have gotten here if it weren’t for that journey. Sometimes you just got to go on the journey in order to arrive at the place that you arrive at.”

Becoming a movie event meant *Section 31* could go in a different direction – namely a faster pace, with more action and a different style of production than the crews in Star Trek City were used to.

“The first thing we had to contend with was that everything that we were building was for essentially two hours, or just over an hour. We weren’t building it to last five years. We’re building it to last just a few months that we needed to shoot it,” Osunsanmi explains.

“If I know I’m only going to look in these three directions, I don’t need to build the fourth direction. It means that if I’m going to build a Section 31 ship from the inside, all the lights don’t need to be multicoloured LEDs for every possible scenario the writers can come up with.

“They only have to be the colours for what I need in that moment, in that script for the three days I’m going to be shooting it, and it goes on and on, so you’re building it for the short term instead of for the long term. There’s something freeing about that, knowing that it’s only going to be here for a short while.

“The wonderful thing about doing a movie is it’s a sprint. It’s not a marathon. Television shows are a marathon. It was really interesting to do a *Star Trek* movie for Paramount+ where we could just go all out, just for a short amount of time.”

As for it being action-heavy, Osunsanmi is pleased it’s translated as such on screen.

“That was the goal, to always have something happening,” he smiles. “I tend to not think the movie is big enough until after I finish it and I watch it. So I’m breaking it down

Continued on page 36...

ROBERT KAZINSKY IS ZEPH

This feels like a new kind of *Trek*, while still being *Trek*...
I'm terrified of how it's going to be received, because it's not the *Trek* people want. The *Trek* that people want, the *Trek* that we all want, is just 1,000 more episodes of *TNG*. Everyone's always furious that they're not getting more TNG, whilst at the same time, when *TNG* came out, everybody hated it.

So this is going to come along and it's not going to feel like any *Trek* that they've ever seen. My fear was that it might not feel like *Trek* at all. So for you to tell me that it still feels like *Trek* whilst being a completely different flavour of *Trek*, that encourages me. In 10 years time, we'll look back and we'll love every single one of these *Trek*s.

Tell us about your character.
His name is Zeph, and he's a human. Craig Sweeny and I did come up with a big backstory – but I'm not sure if Kurtzman approved it – that he was paraplegic and that the suit is his wheelchair. Basically in that era, where people don't need wheelchairs any more, they have different forms of mobility. The suit would become a wheelchair for Zeph, and if he's not in it, he can't move at all.

The idea was that he worked for Section 31 once upon a time, and was constantly augmenting himself as an engineer and the biomechanist that he is, and then ended up causing himself severe injury and doing this all to himself.

He basically shut down his own spinal column, so he had to build this suit to get him back up and running. Now he's so dependent upon this technology to keep functioning. Alok is the one who was constantly getting him the latest pieces. So he's kind of like his fixer, and he's just, at this point, seeing how far technology can take his body. It's very much in the whole Geordi La Forge different perspective on a traditional disability.

What was the suit like? It looks cumbersome.
It was miserable! It wasn't just a misery for me, it was a misery for everybody. It weighed about 50 pounds, which doesn't sound like a lot, but over a 16-hour-day, especially as you sweat and add weight to it... There was only one, so it couldn't be washed, so they would just disinfect it and wipe it every night. I'm a sweaty man, so that was particularly unpleasant for everybody else, but also me.

We knew when we were going to start shooting that the thing that would cost us the most money and time would be the suit, and it *was* the suit, because there were so many technological elements of it that would break. Truly, it was one of the most frustrating things I've ever done, but at the same time, when you're in the suit, you feel like Iron Man.

You feel like you're in something really strong and powerful, which informs everything else you do. And it looks cool. It's okay to be uncomfortable if it looks cool. But I did pitch to Tunde that for any sequels, we can get rid of Zeph, we can bring in his twin brother Jeff, who's a nudist: in nothing, just the complete polar opposite.

As a Trekkie did you have any preconceived ideas as to what it would be like?
I was kind of scared, because what if it wasn't a fun experience? I love *Star Trek* with a real passion, and the fact that it was such wonderful people and such a wonderful experience, and firing phasers is exactly as fun as you think it's going to be.

> **"Firing phasers is exactly as fun as you think it's going to be"**

Seeing Klingons and Andorians, it's everything that you want it to be, with people who exceed every aspect that you want them to exceed.

It was, I think, the one time in my life where my dream came true with zero disappointments. I've said from the beginning, I'll do the job for free, and I'll do it for the rest of my life. But I 100% stand by that now. I don't want Kurtzman to hold me to it, because I need to eat, but I would.

What do you hope audiences will take from your character?
I describe him as the heart of the team, mostly because he's just innocent and full of love. He just loves his team, and doing what he's doing. He's really happy to just be bouncing around, smashing stuff. He just really enjoys it. He's never in a bad mood. He's painfully optimistic.

What I want people to come away from this movie with is the idea that there's no such thing as black and white, basically. The best people in the world, the most moral people that have ever lived, have had to do bad things to get us to where we are now. I hope that Section 31 and Zeph makes people realise that you can root for the middle.

SAM RICHARDSON IS QUASI

Tell us about your character...
I play Quasi, an engineering and physics genius, who is a Chameloid. This is the second iteration of this race being in *Star Trek*, the first being from *Star Trek VI*, played by Iman. Chameloids are a race of shape-shifters that exist in the universe, but they're different from Odo, different from all the shape shifting creatures of the *Star Trek* verse.

No one's ever seen what they actually look like. So I like to say that Quasi chose the form of the most handsome man in the Federation history, from 2024. Iman chose Iman, I chose me.

Quasi is an operations hand of the mission. He does take a second-in-command role. The dynamics between Georgiou and Alok are a little scary to him, because he doesn't trust Georgiou.

Maybe he trusts Georgiou the least out of everybody, knowing that she's a former/current murderous rogue. That's one of the themes of the movie, this multifacetedness – there's more sides to a person than one.

Bringing a new character into the *Star Trek* universe, do you have any say in that?
There's a bit of a collaboration, especially with a project like this, where it's not directly as procedural as *Star Trek* typically is, where it's a very naval material, a moral dilemma episode. This is more of a ragtag group of characters who break moral traditions, untraditionally morally motivated characters.

So then that allows space to find your character, because their motivations aren't just like every *Star Trek* character's – to be a part of Federation. But clearly everybody's pointing in one direction, which is true for this. We're all pointing in the direction of ultimate good, but our ways are a little bit more circumvent-y. So with that, finding our characters, we were allowed to figure out what that was. I was able to give a comedic voice to Quasi and find more than what's on the page, and grow what he is also as part of a team. Because it's a different mission than what *Star Trek* usually deals with, it's more covert, because that's what Section 31 is – the covert arm of the Federation.

What did you notice was different about this version of *Trek*?
In episodic series, everything can be left open-ended, whereas in film, the open ends need to have at least some finality to them. There are deaths in *Section 31* and so those stakes are then multiplied by how finite the group is, and how specific the group is, its main characters who live and die in this. So I feel that that's a big deal for film.

Also, in a series you're spending a lot more time with character development, because you need to see interpersonal relationships happen for the course of several scenes.

You're spending time trying to get to know these characters over the course of [numerous] episodes, whereas this one, you have an hour and a half to introduce characters, make you care, and then thrust them into a situation that's seemingly impossible to get out of. Maybe they don't save the day.

So the pace of this, and getting to know these characters, has to happen very fast and I think this movie does that very well.

> **"I like to say that Quasi chose the form of the most handsome man in the Federation history"**

Were there any "out there" moments for you when filming?
There's some stunts I get to do, some really cool stunts. I had a really good time doing fight choreography and high-flying stunts. That was the best part for me. And my eyes! Those are contact lenses. They're very big, thick contact lenses that are painted gold, so I can't see! My vision is maybe at 20% when I'm wearing those.

They're fun, they look cool, but I won't drive a bus any time when I'm wearing them. I had suggested that I wear them. You don't really need to wear them because as a shape-shifter, truly, it could be anything. But I wore them as tribute to Iman's character, because of the same eyes that she had. I didn't do the feather hair that she had, but they helped me to feel that he is alien, and also show that he's alien. It helps to, as an actor, let me feel in touch with Quasi.

Would you be interested in returning to Section 31?
Oh, very much. If this would keep on going, I would do it for as long as they'd have me. That's to say, if Quasi is around at the end of this one, I'd love to see Quasi show up more. Also, I shouldn't say it, but the problem with being a shape-shifter is that if you behave poorly as an actor, somebody else can take your role and it's seamless.

It's showtime! Michelle Yeoh gets things off and running.

Quasi with Humberly Gonzalez as Melle.

"Oh, this little number? I just threw it on, really."

"You see Michelle's imprints all across the movie, and we just had a wonderful time"

into these little itty bits. I'm an emotional-based director, so whatever the scene is, whether it's performance-based or action-based, I want the audience to feel something when they're watching it, whether it's a thrill or it's 'Wow', or whether it's sympathy, or whether, 'I get that character, I understand what he's going through.' I want the audience to feel something.

"The wonderful thing about doing *Section 31* the movie is that I can max everything out. I can really push everybody, whether it's the crew or whether it's the cast, at 100% and not worry about leaving something in the tank for the next episode, or the finale. It's all happening right now."

SET PHASERS TO STUNNING

When asked about the noticeable differences between working on an ongoing series like *Discovery*, he immediately recalls one scene in *Section 31* where the new format really allowed him to let loose.

"I would say the phase fight," he says of an extended *Dune*-esque battle that's spread across sets and involves moving through walls. He explains that on *Discovery*, that would've taken place in one simple location. In *Section 31*, it goes to at least seven different places – including smashing through a window high above a crowd.

"We're really able to push the limit there. As opposed to having one localised area, we now have it in multiple areas, shot over multiple days, with multiple visual effects and multiple stunt choreographies. Being able to just blow the doors open like that is a lot of fun."

It's this sequence that Osunsanmi says was the most ambitious of the film, logistically. "Having people go through things is not a simple thing," he laughs. "And that's the simplest part of the sequence!

"Another ambitious part of the film was the fight at the end that went on for quite a while, but the part of it that was the most ambitious was the emotional aspect of it.

"But that fight went through probably the most iterations of different choreography and character beats that I've ever been through, because for me, and particularly for Michelle Yeoh, every fight, every action sequence, is actually an extension of the character. It doesn't work otherwise."

Yeoh, he says, brought "a tremendous amount of input" in her role as executive producer. "It was her idea to do the movie in the first place," he says of the original genesis back in 2017. "To her credit, she stood by it every step of the way until this final iteration and was giving notes all along the way about who her character should be, who the other characters should be, what's important to Georgiou, and how this fits into *Star Trek*. When you finally get to this movie that we're in, we went through the script page by page, line by line, we performed it for each other. She was giving notes: the emperor would be doing this, maybe not that. She'd be feeling this, we should be going for this emotionality here and there – so unbelievably involved.

"Then for the fight sequence, we would develop the fights and pre-vis it. We'd show it to her, she'd break it apart, look for how the character ties together, put it back together again. So what you see is this unbelievable, unbelievable collaboration. You see Michelle's imprints all across the movie, and we just had a wonderful, wonderful time doing it."

In another time, perhaps, an actor might not have been so firmly entrenched in a sci-fi role, let alone return to it, but Yeoh and Georgiou seem forever linked.

"She loves the character, and you see it every step of the way," Osunsanmi says. "We're very fortunate. She started when we met her eight years ago. She was an international icon, and then she went and won an Oscar, and she *still* came back.

"When you love a character that the writers have created, Alex and company, you keep coming back because the character is awesome, and it's a multifaceted, dynamic character, and she looks at it as a once in a lifetime opportunity to play a character like that. I think

PICTURES: MICHAEL GIBSON/SOPHY HOLLAND/JAN THIJS/PARAMOUNT+

Zeph with Omari Hardwick as Alok.

we're all fortunate that she has that love. It's contagious. Not only do we love the character, we love her for it."

Section 31 also offers viewers a glimpse into the origins of the Emperor – with Yeoh also involved in this process.

"One of the very first things I said to my casting director was that we needed to find the young woman who was going to open the movie and that everyone would believe had the gravitas to eventually grow into Georgiou, into Michelle Yeoh, and this actress we found, Miku [Martineau], is unbelievable. I just thought what she did was just stunning. From her first audition, I believed her, and I was like, 'That's her!'

"I'm unbelievably passionate about her, because not only did she kill it in the audition, then she came on set, we've got all the *Star Trek*-ness. I mean, it's a big set. Michelle Yeoh came to visit that day because she wanted to watch this young lady, and she killed it.

"She's just got this engine inside of her that allows her to reach all these different levels and put in all this different nuance and intimacy into her performance. What people will see is a slice of what she did. You could build a whole movie around what she created as a character, in what she created as young Georgiou. I'm incredibly passionate about what she achieved."

With that in mind, there's potential for Young Georgiou – as well as other characters from the movie – to return in a similar style in future, Osunsanmi suggests.

"Hopefully the fans love *Section 31* and love this format, and we're able to continue this format with other stories and be able to expand the universe so much faster, because it doesn't have to all be television series. It can just be one pop, one pop, one pop.

"If the audience – the fans – they love it, the sky's the limit with what we can do. The wonderful thing about what Craig Sweeny and Alex Kurtzman have done here is similar to what they did on *Discovery*, in which we've created a foundation by which other things can grow out of.

"I think I might get into a bit of trouble if I expand upon that. But I think as long as there's love from the audience, there's incredible fertile ground that was laid with *Section 31* to continue to grow the franchise and grow the world. The door's open."

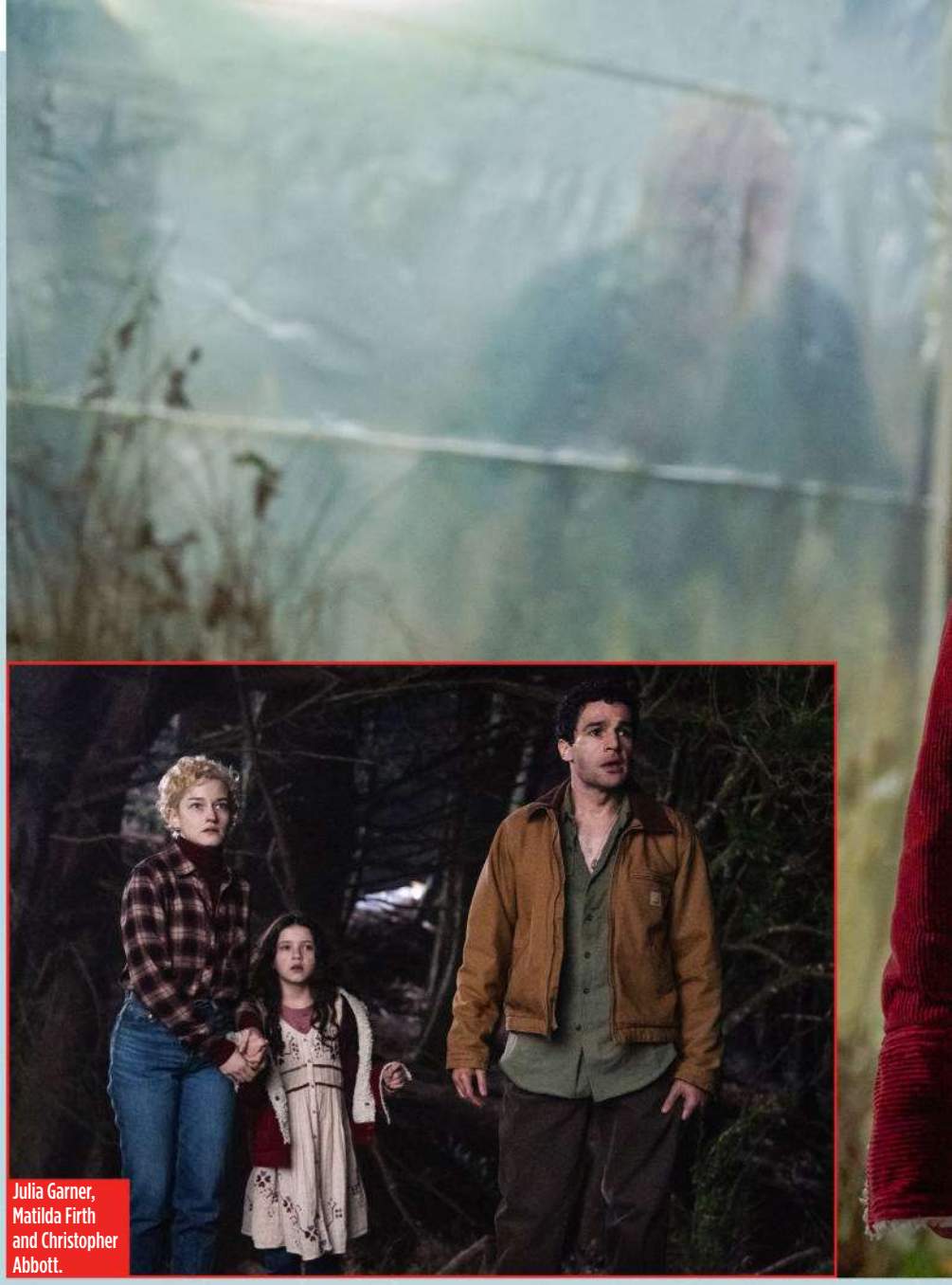
Star Trek: Section 31 is on Paramount+ from 24 January.

STOCK IMAGES: TONGSUR/GETTY, ISTOCK

UNCHAINED MALADY

LEIGH WHANNELL TALKS ABOUT PUTTING A NEW SPIN ON THE WOLF MAN FOR HIS LATEST UPDATE OF A UNIVERSAL CLASSIC

WORDS:
IAN BERRIMAN



Julia Garner, Matilda Firth and Christopher Abbott.

AFTER THE FAILURE OF their 2017 reboot of *The Mummy* caused Universal Pictures to reconsider plans for an interconnected cinematic universe based on their horrors of the '30s and '40s, it briefly looked like no one would be touching that pantheon of properties with a bargepole for a considerable length of time.

However, three short years later *Saw* co-creator Leigh Whannell brought us a new version of *The Invisible Man*, which proved that standalone takes on such classic titles can resonate with a contemporary audience. Now he's aiming to pull off the same trick with a riff on another Universal horror: 1941's classic *The Wolf Man*.

REALITY BITES

Like that previous effort, Whannell's *Wolf Man* (yes, *sans* definite article) is set in the present day, and takes a markedly different approach to the material than its famous forebear.

"Absolutely, I would say there's a commonality between the two films," Whannell tells *SFX* when we pose the question. "I'd sum it up by saying that my approach is to make it as grounded as I can.

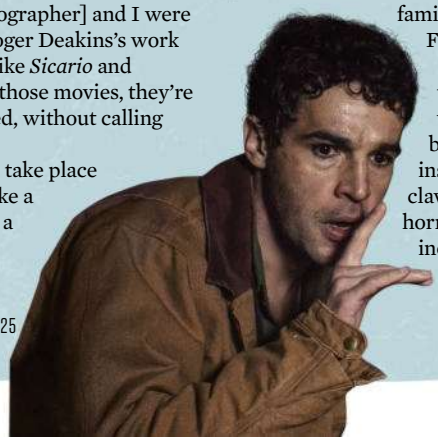
"I'm a big fan of gothic horror movies. I love what Tim Burton did with *Sleepy Hollow*, and I love what Guillermo del Toro does. There's such beauty to those gothic elements, like fog and cemeteries on a hill backlit by the Moon. From a production design element, I love all that stuff... but I think I love it more as a viewer.

"I'm the guy to watch that stuff, but I'm not the right guy to *make* it," the director explains. "When it comes time for me to make a monster, my mind immediately wants to place that monster in the real world and take a very grounded approach: we're not dealing with a fairy tale here, we're not dealing with a folk tale, we're dealing with something that could really happen."

So instead of a heightened look, *Wolf Man* has a "pretty muted palette", Whannell says, similar to *The Invisible Man*. "For both movies, Stefan [Duscio, cinematographer] and I were heavily influenced by Roger Deakins's work with Denis Villeneuve, like *Sicario* and *Prisoners*. If you look at those movies, they're beautifully photographed, without calling attention to themselves.

"A lot of those movies take place in nondescript rooms, like a beige interview room in a police station, but somehow Roger Deakins can make that room beautiful – it's just his placement, his lighting, his framing. So we drew on that a lot. I think that very grounded approach is the way to do it, because it's a way of convincing the audience that this isn't a fantasy, this is real."

Co-written with his wife Corbett Tuck, Whannell's *Wolf Man* follows a family of three: Blake (Christopher Abbott), his wife Charlotte (Julia Garner) and their daughter Ginger (Matilda Firth). After the disappearance of his father (now presumed dead), Blake inherits the Oregon farmhouse where he grew up, and the family relocate from San Francisco.



Once ensconced there, they're attacked by a werewolf. The family barricades themselves inside... but Blake has been clawed by the creature, and a horrifying transformation inevitably follows.

A major factor in why Whannell's last Universal revival was so well-received was how the writer/director used the concept of invisibility to address issues like domestic abuse and gaslighting – topics which, he says, "seemed like they wrapped neatly around the story of *The Invisible Man*". So did he find a similarly easily apprehensible way into the even more outlandish concept of lycanthropy?

"I certainly hope so!" he says. "I was writing it during Covid, so obviously I was in a certain state of mind. Everyone was isolated in their houses, and there was this disease out there. It was a very difficult year, and all the dread and the fear of that time is in this script."

In particular, that fear of infection which permeated the culture back in 2020. "When I sat down and thought about it, I wasn't trying to force anything," Whannell emphasises. "I wasn't saying, 'I've got to work out the theme.' I was just thinking, 'What is this movie about? What's my North Star?' The thing that presented itself straight away was disease."

PICTURES: NICOLA DOVE/UNIVERSAL PICTURES. STOCK IMAGES: VECTORTATU, SOLARSEVEN/GETTY

Uh, Ginger? You might want to turn around...

THE BOX OF DELIGHTS

The make-up artist had some unique inspiration

Wolf Man's make-up artist, Arjen Tuiten, previously worked with Rick Baker on *Maleficent*. Which meant he was in the position to ask a special favour... "This is a true story," says Whannell, adopting a confidential tone. "He used Jack Pierce's original box."

As Universal horror fans will know, Pierce was responsible for the iconic looks of the creatures in *Frankenstein*, *The Mummy* and *The Wolf Man*.

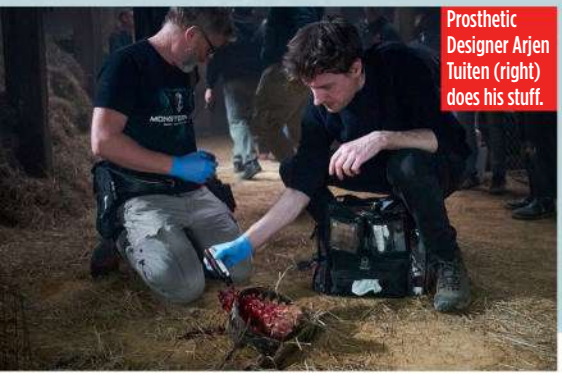
"He'll probably kill me for telling you this," Whannell continues, "but Rick Baker owns it, and he asked if he could borrow it as a piece of inspiration." Back in 2009, Baker recounted how said box was rescued from the kerb by a friend after Pierce's widow cleared out his possessions, and (following much pleading) eventually made its way into his possession.

"I walked up to this wooden box and I opened it," Whannell says, recalling his first encounter with this piece of Hollywood history, "and the smell that comes out of it... it smells like the 1930s. What does the 1930s smell like? It's some mixture of tobacco, asbestos and engine grease.

"It's in really good condition, y'know – I wasn't blowing dust off it. And the first thing I see is a typed call sheet for a Frankenstein film. It was so nuts to be actually staring at this object!"

UNIVERSAL PICTURES / ALBUM/ALAMY

Christopher Abbott gets wolfed-up on set.



Prosthetic Designer Arjen Tuiten (right) does his stuff.

In line with the way Whannell's Griffin achieved invisibility through the use of technology, this will be a less supernatural take on lycanthropy. "If you think about the concept of a werewolf, it's a disease," Whannell rationalises. "It's a bodily thing that's affecting us. I could really easily break that down and turn this movie into a story about dealing with that.

"All of us know somebody who's suffered from an illness that has broken them down," he continues. "Most people you meet know somebody who's had an experience with cancer, if not their own experience with cancer. The fragility of the human body and the fact that we might have to face this stuff one day is a scary concept. That's always something you should gravitate towards with a horror movie: does it scare me in real life? So that just seemed to be the right way to go."

Whannell is 47 now. It is, your *SFX* correspondent observes (being of a similar vintage) the sort of age where you start to become more conscious of your mortality, and the possibility of serious, life-threatening illness – there's a reason why this period of life is sometimes darkly referred to as "sniper's alley". "You're absolutely right," he says. "I went to the doctor recently and he took some blood and said, 'You're in a danger zone for your cholesterol.' It's the first time I've ever been to the doctor and had him say anything other than, 'Yep, you're fine'!

"We are in that age bracket of thinking about our mortality, *and* we're thinking about our parents. Everybody knows one day that phone call's going to come: 'Your dad's in the hospital', 'Your mum's in the hospital'. But we ignore it because it's frightening to think about your parents passing away."

It's something Whannell is doubly aware of as a parent. "I had kids quite late – I was in my mid- to late-thirties. So I have seven-year-old twins. By the time they're 20, I'm going to be quite old. And we really don't have a lot of crossover time with people. Your parents were →

HAPPY AS LARRY

The story of the Lon Chaney Jr-starring 1941 original

Written by Curt Siodmak, a German Jew who fled his homeland in 1937, and directed by George Waggner, *The Wolf Man* wasn't Universal's first werewolf horror – that was 1935's *Werewolf Of London*. But it was the one that captured the public imagination and launched this folkloric figure into American pop culture.

Shot in 25 days, under the working title *Destiny*, the film follows Larry Talbot (played by Lon Chaney Jr, son of *The Hunchback Of Notre Dame*'s "Man of a Thousand Faces"), who returns home to Wales and reconciles with his estranged father.

While attempting to save a young woman being attacked by a regular-looking wolf (actually Bela Lugosi's lycanthropic gypsy), he's bitten, dooming him to transformations into a furry-faced, upright-walking humanoid wolf. Ultimately Larry meets a tragic fate: unwittingly beaten to death by his father, using his own cane with a silver wolf's-head handle.

It could have been a very different movie. In an earlier draft, Chaney's character was Larry Gill, an American mechanic visiting Sir John Talbot's castle to install a telescope. And until just a couple of weeks before production, the plan was that it would be left ambiguous whether Larry was *really* transforming into a wolf (of the four-legged kind), or whether it was all in his head – with the hero's wolf form only seen from his point of view, reflected in a pool of water.

It took a good four or five hours for Universal's head of make-up Jack Pierce to create the look. As well as a snout piece, wig and greasepaint, this involved – according to Warner publicity – Pierce applying layers of yak hair to Chaney's face by hand, glued on with spirit gum, then singed using curling irons.

When shooting the facial transformation, with its multiple transitions, Chaney's neck was placed in a head rest. Then his outline was drawn onto sheets of glass, so that after each trip to Pierce's make-up chair he could be lined up in the correct position again.

The Wolf Man was a huge hit on release, and Chaney remained extremely proud of the part – particularly since he not only originated the character, but encored it in four sequels (*Frankenstein Meets The Wolf Man*, *House Of Frankenstein*, *House Of Dracula* and *Abbott And Costello Meet Frankenstein*). That made the Wolf Man the only classic Universal monster played by the same actor in every big-screen appearance.

UNIVERSAL PICTURES

Charlotte and Ginger make a grisly discovery.

alive for a long time before you came along. Then you were born, and they get a certain amount of time with you. Then they're gone, and you keep going. This overlap is fascinating to me.

"There's a line in the movie where Christopher Abbott's character says, 'We have such a short amount of time with people,'" he reveals. "This is stuff that obsesses me, and I think I just have to write about the thing that's obsessing me. That's what we all should write. If any of us is going to sit down and write a screenplay, don't even start unless you've got a handle on the thing that is consuming you."

This isn't, then, it seems safe to assume, the sort of movie which will be crammed with homages to the OG black and white classic starring Lon Chaney Jr (see left). We don't expect to hear its famous rhyme: "Even a man who is pure in heart and says his prayers by night can become a wolf when the wolfsbane blooms and the Autumn moon is bright". Or to spy a cane topped by a silver wolf's head. And perhaps more controversially, you *should* expect to encounter a different type of werewolf altogether.

"It's not that kind of movie," Whannell confirms. "I think the best tribute that I can make to Lon Chaney Jr is to work with Arjen Tuiten, the make-up artist, to create the most scary version of this character for modern audiences.

"If you think about it, when *Frankenstein* [1931] was first released, the monster wasn't cute or cuddly," he continues. "When James Whale directed that film, that monster was terrifying to people, and you have to look at it in that 1930s context.

"Now that look – the square head and the bolts – is not very threatening anymore. There's a version of Frankenstein that somebody could make that would be scary, but that person would have to be working in a 2024 context. What's scary now is very different from what was scary in the 1930s. So that was the best tribute I could pay."

So how exactly does that central theme of disease manifest itself in monstrous form?

Never bring a gun to a wolf fight. Actually, do.

Whannell says that in his initial discussions with Tuiten, he had a clear idea of what he was after. "I wanted it to be very grounded, and I wanted to take the approach that it was a disease. Arjen got that straight away. He said, 'Let me spend some time with it.' He read the script, and was marinating in it, and then built this model. The first time I saw it I was like, 'That's it!'

In the process, it sounds like Whannell completely ruined his browser history. Pray for his personalised ads... "I was looking at a lot of photos of leprosy and different disfiguring illnesses, and obviously that's not a fun thing to Google!

"I worked a lot to have a unique look for it. It's a human being who's suffering from something that's affecting their mind. So it's not this thing of transforming and suddenly you're a different thing. What was more interesting to me was the transition.

"I was very inspired by *The Fly*," he adds, referring to David Cronenberg's 1986 movie, in which Jeff Goldblum's scientist Seth Brundle degenerates into something less than human after a teleportation test meshes his DNA with a housefly's, shedding fingernails and miscellaneous other body parts along the way.

"What I was really interested in was the progression of an illness. I was unfortunate enough to see a friend of mine suffer from ALS [aka Lou Gehrig's disease], and it killed her but it took a long time. It was a three-year process of bodily degeneration.

"It starts off pretty benign: you need a cane to walk. Then that progresses to a wheelchair. Then that progresses to you can't move out of bed. The slow-motion horror of an illness like that is what's horrific to me. More horrific than 'The moon comes out and I transform.'

So those were the reference points, more so than the giant four-legged wolf creature that's been done – and done well.

"I think you have to bring a new approach," Whannell argues, clearly anticipating some degree of backlash from *The Wolf Man* fans. "Maybe there are some people that won't like it because they love the traditional wolf too much, but that was the approach I wanted."

That look of Whannell's Wolf Man, which he underlines was "100% practical, all make-up – there are no CGI elements" – is being kept under wraps for now. Although if you're the sort of person who's plugged into online movie news 24/7, you may feel like you've already seen it...

Back in October, as part of Universal's Halloween Horror Nights event in Orlando, a performer in make-up took to the stage for a Wolf Man photo-op – one Whannell knew nothing about. He's clearly pretty exasperated by this – understandably, given the largely derisory reaction to said reveal.

"The problem when you're making a movie on this scale for a major studio, and it's a corporation with theme parks in many countries, is that it's a multi-headed beast, so it's very difficult to control every aspect," he explains. "With that, things slipped through the cracks, and it was like, 'Oh, they're doing this promotion for *Wolf Man* at a theme park, but it doesn't look right. We shouldn't be putting that out in the world, because people are going to think that's what our wolf looks like.'"

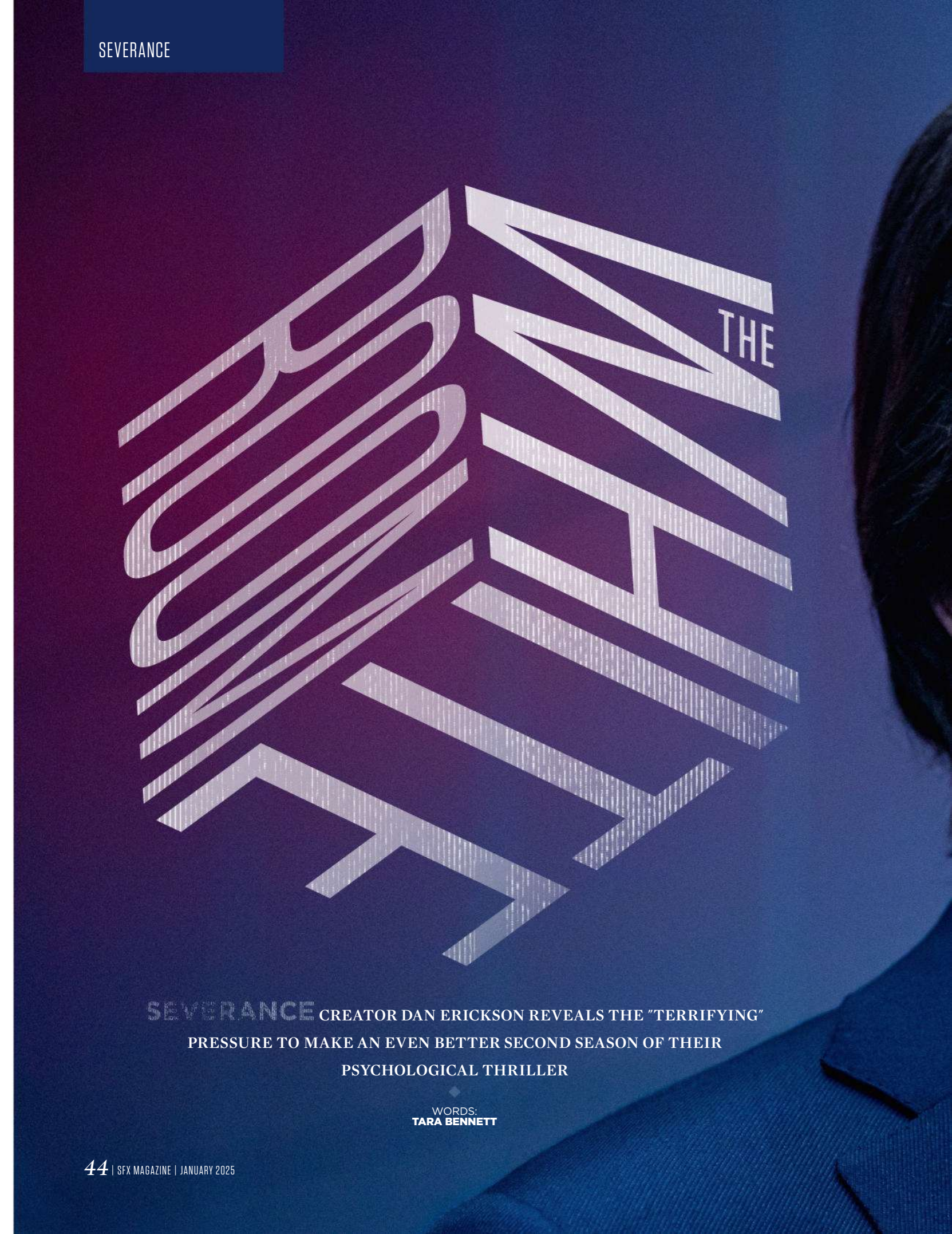
> **"I wanted it to be very grounded, and I wanted to take the approach that it was a disease"**

What would he say to *SFX* readers who have seen those photos? "My only response is to say, 'Look, that doesn't represent what we're doing.' All I can do is wait for the movie to come out. Then hopefully people will be like, 'Oh, I see what they were doing.'"

When the general public *do* eventually see *Wolf Man*, Whannell – who, when we speak to him, is beavering away on the sound mix – fervently hopes that most do so in a cinema. "We're definitely making the film for movie theatres," he says. "The way we're mixing it, it's like an aural assault.

"When you go that far to mix the sound in Dolby and rip people's heads off with the mix, you don't want them to experience it on an iPad. So I guess the last thing I would leave you with would be a shameless plug to say, 'Please go and see this in theatres so you can get the full experience.' Or see it twice!" he laughs. "Why not back to back?"

Wolf Man is in cinemas from 17 January.



SEVERANCE CREATOR DAN ERICKSON REVEALS THE "TERRIFYING" PRESSURE TO MAKE AN EVEN BETTER SECOND SEASON OF THEIR PSYCHOLOGICAL THRILLER

WORDS:
TARA BENNETT

THREE YEARS AGO, *SEVERANCE*, writer Dan Erickson's very first television series, premiered on Apple TV+ and became a cultural touchstone around the globe. Birthed from a modest daydream about employees dissociating from their work, Erickson's idea was scooped up by Ben Stiller's production company.

There it became a high-concept, semi-surrealist psychological thriller about a near-future, where state of the art technology allows the fictional Lumon Industries employees to surgically separate their work memories from their personal memories.

Starring Adam Scott, Britt Lower, John Turturro and Zach Cherry as a Lumon team labouring enigmatically under the Macrodata Refinement (MDR) division, the series ushered audiences into their odd world through the point of view of Mark.

We experience both his "Innie" existence as a passive worker bee for the Eagan family empire, and his "Outie" reality being covertly surveilled by a former Lumon co-worker/best friend and current Lumon manager, Ms Cobel (Patricia Arquette). By season's end, the "Innie" lives of all four employees are revealed to their "Outies", while the more nefarious aspects of the severance programme threaten to take down the whole company.

With humanity itself coming out of the gauzy haze of the pandemic in 2022, *Severance* struck a cultural nerve with its slightly dreamy, existential portrayal of people existing in the world, which helped make it a rare first season mega-hit.

Today, Erickson acknowledges to *SFX* that this singular conjunction of show premise to mass experience put even more pressure on him, Stiller and his writing team to match or better themselves in season two.

At the peak of their critical and public adoration, Erickson explains, they were in the writers' room for season two, where they felt both "elation" and "utter dread" about creating the next chapter.

PERSEVERANCE

"I was in therapy because of all the wonderful feelings I was getting from people responding to the show, and the surprise of it. I really thought it would be a much more niche audience," Erickson says of *Severance*'s reception. "Then you're like, 'How do I avoid letting these people down that have suddenly invested a little piece of themselves in this show?'

"Knowing that we're going to come back and shoot this again, I don't want to make people come back and spend months and months shooting something that's not up to the quality of the first season. So it was really intense."

Sarah Bock joins the cast as a new regular.

Unlike with other series, Apple TV+ gave Erickson and Stiller the time to get the story right. Then there were extra delays due to the 2023 SAG and WGA strikes. "It took a long time," Erickson says of delivering season two. "Then there came a point, a certain ways into production, where I finally started to feel, 'I actually think this is *better*.'

"I don't think this is any more a matter of, like, can we make something acceptable? I think we've actually got something that's even more exciting than what we had before."

Having laid all the groundwork about the MDR team and the basics of Lumon in season one, Erickson says the biggest question to

> **"I think we've actually got something that's even more exciting than what we had before"**

The employees who came in from the cold.

PICTURES: JON PACK/APPLE+. STOCK IMAGES: GETTY

Helly (Britt Lower) and Mark (Adam Scott).

address in season two was how to expand the world and expand the scope of the show, but still make it feel like *Severance*. "We didn't want a whole season of Mark, Helly, Irving and Dylan walking around white hallways going to another department, but this time, it's pigs!" Erickson jokes.

"I never wanted the show to just be about how we're all different people at work. I remember when I was first writing the pilot, in the worst version, that's as deep as it got."

"We wanted to expand and deepen and make it scarier and weirder and funnier. But at the same time, inevitably, we would hit a point where we're like, 'Maybe that's too far.' We don't want this to become just another sci-fi show, or just another adventure show, or whatever the hell kind of show this is.

"There's a tricky balance to *Severance* that none of us even fully understand, except we *know* when we've lost it, and then we know that we have to find our way back to it."

As season two starts, the globe is on the precipice of massive political change, which Erickson understands will certainly affect how →

Jen Tullock returns as Mark's sister, Devon.

Irving (John Turturro) faces some hard truths.

audiences receive this season. "I always say season three, if it happens, is going to be the comet season," he jokes.

He's hoping to elaborate on a certain perspective this season: specifically that of the corporate cult of personality as personified by Lumon Industries, and the deification of capitalist leaders.

"Somebody who doesn't necessarily even have great traits as a human being can be elevated and deified and turned into a figure that people are willing to die for, or that people are willing to sacrifice everything for.

"You've got that in Kier Eagan on this show," he says of Lumon's shadowy founder. "This is somebody who, the characters at the beginning, they see him as almost God-like," he continues. "It takes a lot of deprogramming for them to realise that the people in power didn't ever really have their interests at heart. I think people, if they like a show, will project it onto whatever their political leanings might be.

"But for me, I just get really scared with the cult of personality, and where that intersects with big business and where that intersects with politics. What we're seeing now in the US and all over the world, it's scary.

"But I'm happy to be putting out a show that, at the very least, will give people a little bit of distance and solace from what's going on. And maybe it'll be a helpful piece in the conversation."

Dylan (Zach Cherry) and Irving have theories.

Patricia Arquette plays the devious Ms Cobel.

Creator/writer Dan Erickson actually enjoying work.

NEW BLOOD

When it comes to the Eagans – including Helly, who is actually Helena Eagan – Erickson promises viewers they'll come to know more about their history and goals as an organisation. "We're going to see some of their plans and machinations coming to fruition, or nearing fruition," he says.

"It was vitally important that we [the writers] know them, and that we know them well. I have what has become a many, many page document that's essentially a show Bible for us, that keeps the lore of the show. We know the exact year that each Eagan CEO took power and which technological advancements happened under their watch.

"There's inter-family drama that I've built for them over the course of the generations that will probably never be on the show. But *I* know it, which helps me. Ironically, having it that rigidly figured out gives us freedom, because we know the sandbox, and we know all the toys that are in the sandbox, and now we can play."

Erickson also promises some very different perspectives and ways of telling their stories around the "core four" characters, outside of just bouncing between the "Innie" and "Outie" worlds. "Each of them now has basically two versions that we're trying to service," he explains. "We had so much fun with the season one finale and how it played with the form. So there's a lot of different ways that we played with the structure this season, and that's intentional.

> **"With each new character, we said, what new dynamic do they bring to the conceit?"**

"We wanted, right out of the gate, to not have your standard *Severance* episode, as we're used to seeing it structured. In episode four, we really try some different things, and that's always exciting to me."

There are additions to the cast too, including Merritt Wever, Ólafur Darri Ólafsson, Gwendoline Christie and more. Erickson says of the new characters, "We wanted to be judicious in bringing in people that we thought would really enrich the world.

"We wanted to show different ways that a severed life could be strange that we haven't seen before. With each new character, we talked about, what new dynamic do they bring to the conceit? Then on the outside, it was this really exciting process of building out the lives of each of these characters. Nobody is an island, so that meant bringing in new people and seeing how those people all interact."

Asked if there's a particular theme for season two, Erickson muses, "The most concise way to say it is that it is just about disassociation. It's about the draw, but also the danger of hiding from pieces of yourself, or your life, or your society, that you don't like, that you want to pretend aren't there.

"That's a very human thing to want to do, because life is much too complicated for anybody. So there's this desire we all have to kind of simplify and be like, 'I just want to be one person, in one room focusing on a simple thing.' But if we are willing to lessen ourselves to that degree, we can become very easy to manipulate and to be used by people in power.

"They have a vested interest in keeping our perception simple and myopic. It's challenging to live as a whole person, and it's uncomfortable to face the pieces of yourself that are painful and you don't like. But ultimately that's what we should be aspiring to do."

Severance is on Apple TV+ from 17 January.

Newcomer Gwendoline Christie looks unhinged...

THE BIG STICK

Tramell Tillman is Seth Milchick, Lumon's severed floor supervisor, who looms large over the "Innies"

What was it like for you shooting season one of *Severance*, trying to figure out this character? How much had the producers shared with you about him?

● In season one we were in a very nice position in that we had all of the episodes available to us, so we knew where the story was going. The tricky part about it was that we weren't sure of the tone. So that started many conversations that carried on from when we first started filming.

What was wonderful is that Ben and Dan both made themselves available for us to speak with, and Mark Friedman, the showrunner at the time. They were always at the ready to talk about this character. It was a lot of artistic freedom that I was given in order to create Milchick. I also believe that awareness of social politics came into play.

Understanding that this character is one of the few persons of colour that's in a leadership position under Cobel, and how do you navigate that in a primarily white corporate structure? I appreciated that they might not have all the intel, but they were willing to listen to an actor who has had the experience of working in corporate America, to be able to give life to this character and speak to the delicacies and the intricacies of who this character is, and why he does what he does.

Lumon Industries is almost a religious entity for those who believe in the Eagan mission. Is Milchick a true believer?

● I really do believe that in order for Milchick to carry on, he has to be fully invested in what he is selling. He has to be invested in the dream. And there *is* this cultish, religious feel to it. There are traditions. We stand, we sit... all of that really feeds to the lore of what Lumon is about, what Kier [Eagan] represents, and why we are serving him. So if we are to serve him again, that speaks to Milchick's motivations.

Historical reference, for me, really is tied to the institution of slavery. There is an overseer element that is layered within Milchick. All the things that he's allowing, what he's supporting, what he's pushing. Even taking them to the break room, and, in a way, torturing them to submit to his power over the company.

Is it rough playing that subtext?

● Me as a person, I wrestled with it. There's an ickiness to it. It's like this sick, slimy film that I have playing Milchick. One of the constant conversations that I have with our creative team is that I don't want to create a character that does not have a sense of humanity. I really believe that Milchick has the effect that he does because we are not certain if he's good or bad, or in-between.

That also speaks to his ability to manipulate those that he surveys, because we don't know where he's coming from, the tactics and how he moves about space. That's empowering and that's invigorating, in a way. For me, as an actor, it helps not knowing specifically what the corporation does.

When Milchick is with the "Innies" there's a sense that he's the perennial outsider looking in at their bond. Does he want to be one of them?

● [The cast] is such a delight, which helps in telling this crazy, wild, dramatic thriller of a story. What I enjoy as an actor is watching the four friends interact with each other and have their own relationship. I then find that I become incredibly jealous of them. I have to be the mean guy as Milchick: "No, you can't do that. No fun here!" But I think it also feeds the character and also this little microcosm moment that Milchick has this *want* to be liked.

Can you give us a clue as to how the changes at Lumon shape Milchick in season two?

● I always envision Milchick to be extremely ambitious. I think he has visions of his own life and his trajectory. I do believe that the changes that occur came so rapidly that I don't know if he had the moment to revel in, or celebrate, these changes.

We have to take a look at where we leave off in season one. We almost faced the destruction of the severed procedure, because we've been outed. I imagine the story that happened in the administration wing amongst the board was, "How do we fix this? What do we need to do?" So those moments were all just damage control.

So now, Milchick's journey, again, is to keep the train on the track. But we're now going uphill. There's a lot of twists and turns, and the stakes are much higher, and the pressure on Milchick is even higher. Change and productivity come at a high cost.

ENTERING INTO

//strap//

Words: Ian Berriman

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THE SPIRIT

STEVEN SODERBERGH TELLS US ABOUT HIS FIRST EVER SUPERNATURAL HORROR: PRESENCE, A HAUNTED HOUSE TALE TOLD FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE GHOST

WORDS: **IAN BERRIMAN**

WE'VE WAITED A LONG time for an opportunity to talk to Steven Soderbergh. The Oscar-winning director of *Traffic*, *Erin Brockovich* and *Ocean's 11* hasn't shot a science fiction film since his 2002 remake of *Solaris*. And while his subsequent work includes several psychological thrillers, he's never made an out-and-out horror. Until now.

Summarising *Presence* risks making it sound fairly generic. A family of four – mother Rebecca (Lucy Liu), father Chris (Chris Sullivan), and kids Chloe (Callina Liang) and Tyler (Eddy Maday) – move into a new home. They're a somewhat dysfunctional clan. Rebecca's unspecified dodgy dealings are placing the marriage under strain. Chloe is struggling after her best friend's death. And Tyler is... well, an unsympathetic douchebag.

This well-appointed house has one undesirable feature: a spectral squatter, whom the sensitive Chloe soon starts to sense. The rest of the family are sceptical – until a poltergeist trashes Tyler's room right in front of them.

What makes the film unique is how we learn all this: by observing the family from the first-person perspective of the titular presence, locking you into a ghost's point of view. But whose ghost? And what exactly does it want?

The film was inspired by an incident in a house Soderbergh owns in the Los Feliz neighbourhood of LA. "A housesitter said that she saw an apparition," Soderbergh tells *SFX*. "She described it as a woman of an age that, when we did a little diligence, matched the description of someone who had died in our house. One of our neighbours is convinced that the woman was murdered by her daughter – that it was not a suicide, as ruled by the police."

This set him thinking. "If this woman was still hanging around, how would she feel about people moving into her house? That got me started on the idea of this series of shots from the point of view of a person, at eye height, with time passing and fades to black in between. I wrote about eight pages where I set up that gimmick, with a realtor showing the house to a family. I sent that to David Koepp and said, 'Does this spark anything with you?' And he said, 'I know exactly what to do with this.'"

Presence is Soderbergh's second collaboration with the screenwriter, following the 2022 thriller *Kimi*. But it's also the culmination of an ambition stretching back 35 years. The two became pals in 1989, when both had films screening at Sundance: Soderbergh's *Sex, Lies And Videotape* and Koepp's *Apartment Zero*.

"We got friendly after the festival," Soderbergh explains, "and were looking for something to make together in the mid-'90s. We were going to do a remake of a movie called *The Uninvited*."

In Lewis Allen's 1944 chiller, two siblings buy a house haunted by a woman who fell to her death from the nearby cliff. A landmark in the genre, it doesn't play its ghost for laughs, or ultimately explain it away.

"We came up with some really interesting, creepy, psychological moves," Soderbergh recalls, "but got stuck on the third act, because David's like, 'You've got to explain why this is all going on.' I was like, 'But I don't want to!' The 'herald the explainer' scene was tripping me up. So we stopped, put it aside, and decided to keep being friends."

Secondary inspiration for the look of *Presence* – which plays out chiefly during daylight, and (being free of cobwebs and cracks of thunder) is one of the least gothic haunted house films – came from a surprising source. "One of my favourite shows is *Celebrity Ghost Stories*," Soderbergh reveals.

This US reality series has logged accounts of paranormal goings-on from the likes of Carrie Fisher, Mickey Rooney and Chaka Khan. "You've got to see it! You can tell people were traumatised by these experiences – they're not kidding around. What distinguished a lot of those stories was that they often didn't come with the trappings of a typical ghost experience as we've seen in the movies – they were very matter of fact.
I thought, 'Okay, that's interesting.'"

The film was shot with a Sony a7 mirrorless digital camera. "It looks like a still camera, but it's got the same sensor Sony's using in their high-end motion picture camera," Soderbergh explains. "So the image is really extraordinary, and it was just the right size. It's very small, and it was in a Ronin stabiliser [handheld gimbal] which is also not large."

That's how the director was able to capture shots where the camera rapidly glides up and down a staircase – which may have you fretting about the cameraman breaking a leg... "That was a real concern," Soderbergh says, "because those were some serious stairs!"

Fortunately he was wearing sensible shoes! "I think they're marine footwear... like ballet slippers with rubber grips. Because in addition to not wanting to slip I was trying to be as quiet as possible so I didn't ruin the sound."

The set-up meant he could look down at his feet, then, through trial and error in rehearsals, work out roughly where to aim the camera. "If I'm on the stairs, I'm making a best guess where I should be pointing the lens. Unfortunately there were a couple of takes where I'd look at the playback and I would have missed it and cut somebody's head off."

Altogether, the rig weighed about 4.5-5.5 kg. "Which is not heavy," Soderbergh notes, "until you have to hold it out from your body for, like, seven minutes. Then it starts to get shaky!"

What's lurking in Chloe's (Callina Liang) closet?

Lucy Liu reacts to the director screwing up another take.

ALL ABOUT MY MOTHER

Soderbergh's mum was a parapsychologist

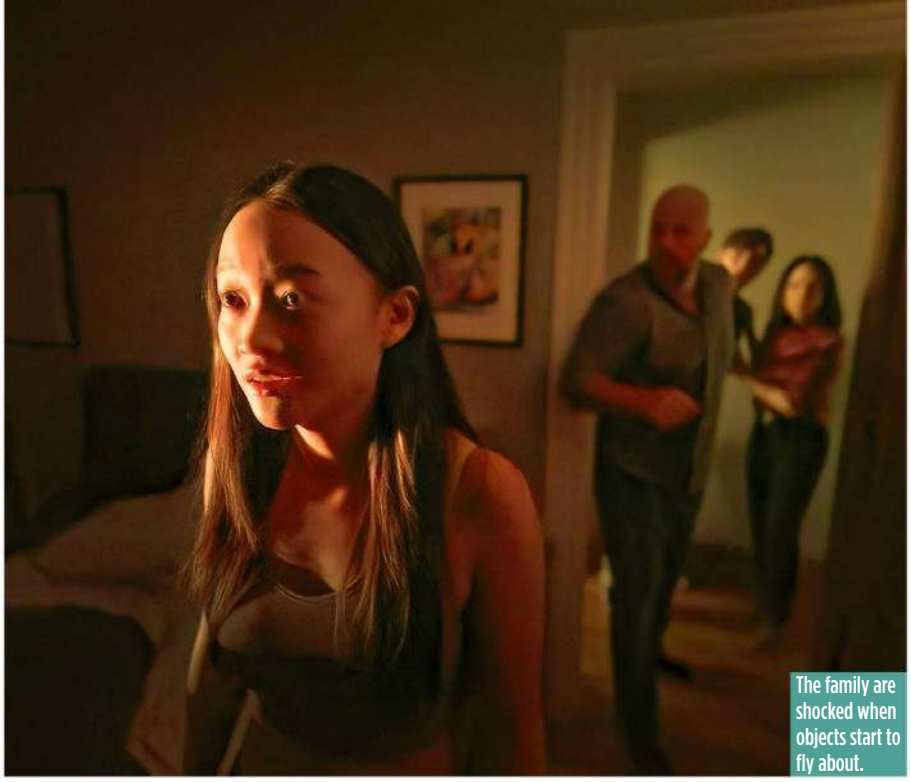
The only part of the screenplay Soderbergh asked Koepp to "go back and look at one more time" was a scene where a medium (played by Julia Fox) visits the house. "In the first draft it felt a little more movie-like. I said, 'I want her to be this totally regular person. Like she's taken off during her lunch break to do this as a favour.'"

In part, that's because the director's mother, Mary Ann Soderbergh, dabbled in parapsychology. "She would have people over and do readings, and had the affect of a normal person," he says. "It didn't feel like a movie growing up around it. It felt like this is just something that my mom is into. So I wanted to make sure we were being fair to someone who claims to have second sight.

"I don't think she ever saw a ghost," Soderbergh adds. "She was someone who just felt very strongly that she had access to some other realm where these things may play out.

"And this was not mainstream yet. This was considered far-out stuff! So I wasn't hiding it, but I certainly wasn't telling people that my mom had tarot card readings all last night."

PICTURES: PETER ANDREWS/THE SPECTRAL SPIRIT COMPANY, STOCK IMAGES: GEENGRAPHY, MIKI-PEARLY/GETTY



The family are shocked when objects start to fly about.

Soderbergh: we'll have whatever he's smoking.

So did he develop hench biceps over the course of the three-week shoot? "What I had to do was come up with a way, for longer takes, to keep moving a little bit so I could reduce the amount of shake in my arms." While this was a practical consideration, it had other benefits.

"I was solving a problem, but also I felt that in the scenes where [the family] are not moving but talking, having the camera completely still wasn't very interesting. So I just tried to be subtle in those scenes about keeping the camera moving – remembering that somebody's trying to watch this, and I'm allowed to move a bit."

It seems Soderbergh was not only wearing the hats of director, cinematographer and editor, but was part of the ensemble too, playing the unseen ghost.

"Yeah, I really was. I'm used to being close to the actors as the camera operator, but this was a real dance that I was doing with the cast. It was fun, because I really got to share some of their performance anxiety as we were doing the scene.

"On occasion, a take would get ruined because I'd bumped into them, or got trapped in the wrong place because I timed my movement incorrectly. At one point when I said, 'Cut! My bad. I ruined the take.' Lucy said, 'Wow! I've never heard a director say that before: 'We're stopping because *I* did something wrong.'

> **"In the last 10 minutes you can feel this sense of not being able to escape the image"**

"I like actors," he continues. "That might sound obvious, but you'd be *shocked* to discover how many directors don't like them or don't understand them, and don't have much empathy for what they're asking of them. I'm very sensitive to it.

"What they do requires a level of vulnerability I'd never be able to muster, so I'm very conscious of creating an environment in which they feel safe enough to jump off a cliff. I want them to feel like I'm the net, and I will never drop you."

With every movie he makes, Soderbergh develops what he terms a "tool kit", and a set of rules about visual grammar. Here that tool kit had "one tool in it" – which was "liberating in a strange sort of way". What additional rules did he set himself?

For starters, he wanted the perspective of the ghost, which – as a visiting medium divines, is initially unclear about its identity, or purpose – to evolve. "We shot mostly in chronological order, which allowed me to have the presence learning how to look at things. I wanted the way it looked at things to be different at the end than at the beginning, because it's picking up on what to focus on."

Another rule, formulated a couple of days into shooting, entailed a significant conceptual change. "In the script, the presence was able to move through walls," he explains. "I felt having it adhere to the same rules that we do when it moves is going to be better. When we were getting to one of the scenes where it would move through a wall, I just felt, 'That's wrong.' So I threw that idea away."

We're accustomed to snatches of first-person perspective in slasher movies (as the killer peeps at a disrobing co-ed), but shooting an entire movie that way is another matter. The only prior example we recall is 1947's *Lady In The Lake*, a Raymond Chandler noir whose gimmick is that (as the trailer puts it) "You play the starring role!" – PI Philip Marlowe. "There was also a movie a couple of years ago called *Hardcore Henry*," Soderbergh notes.

It's a risky venture – was he confident that it would work? "Well, the danger in making a POV movie is the audience's primal desire to see a reverse angle and look into the eyes of the character experiencing the story," Soderbergh observes.

"This is a very strong impulse, and for me, when I've seen first-person POV movies, it's a real barrier. But I was convinced we wouldn't have that problem, because very quickly you would understand there's nothing to cut to."

And it does pay off. Indeed, over the length of a feature, the device has a visceral effect. "As the movie begins to tighten and your sense of dread begins to escalate, you really begin to feel uneasy," Soderbergh says, "and the POV conceit allows for no let up in the tension.

"There's nowhere to look away to. Having been in screenings with large numbers of people, in the last 10 minutes you can feel this sense of not being able to escape the image."

SPECIAL DELIVERY

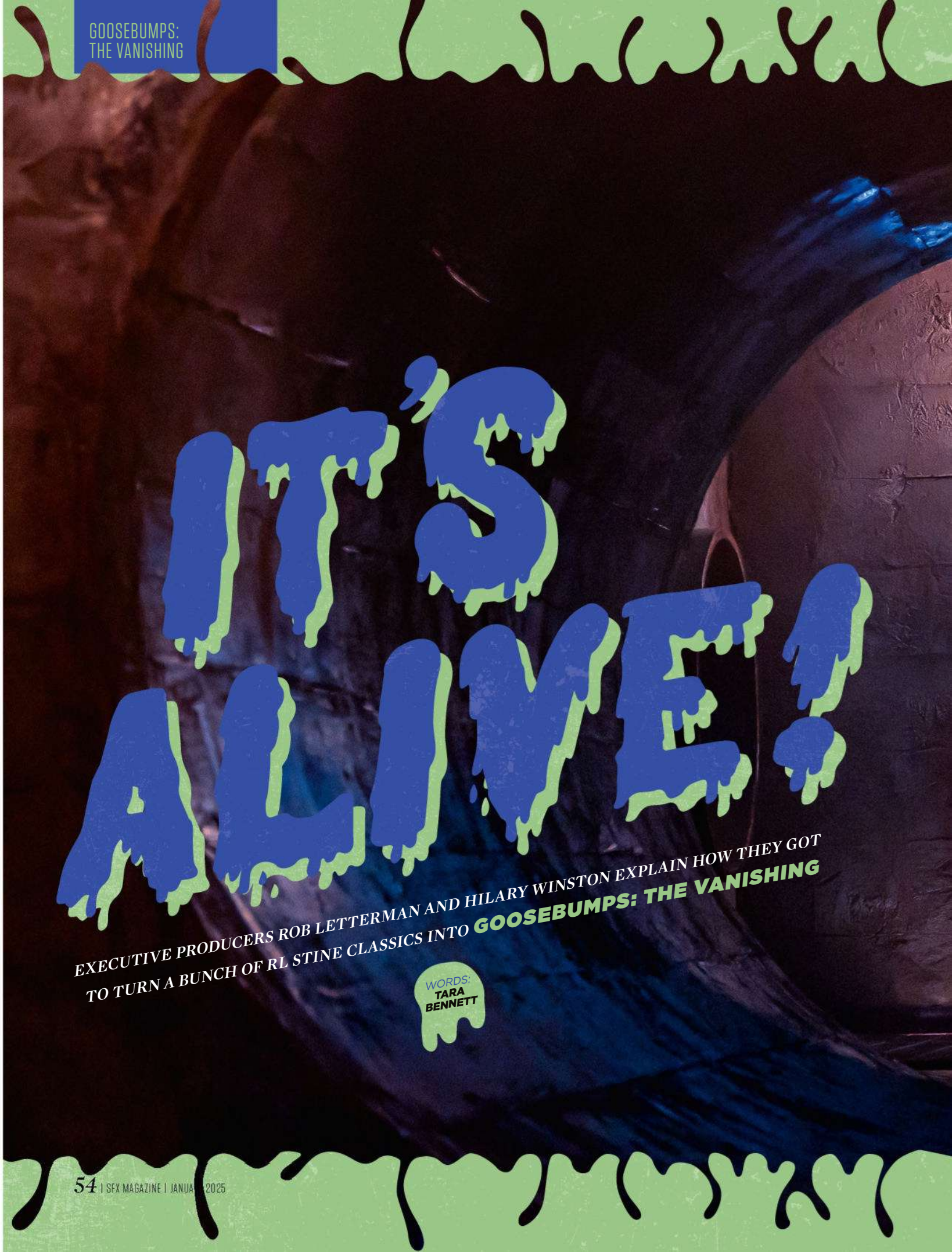
Now Soderbergh has returned to *SFX*'s terrain, what are the chances of him doing so again soon? Pretty good, by the sound of it. "Genre is such a great delivery system for any idea you want to talk about," Soderbergh notes, remarking that at its core, *Presence* is about "a family in trouble" – just "spiced up a bit" with a ghost. "*Get Out* is one of the best commentaries on race in the movies for a long time, and also just a great genre film.

"Somebody asked me recently, 'Where do you think the most interesting filmmaking is happening right now?' I said, 'Oh, in the horror space.' In terms of pure cinema, the stuff I'm seeing coming out of the horror space – especially the low-budget horror space – is really interesting.'

"Did you see *In A Violent Nature*?" he enthuses, referring to the recent Canadian slasher with a not-dissimilar formal device. "That movie is *craaaazy*!"

Maybe it's time to dust off that unfinished treatment for *The Uninvited*, then? "Well, I don't know if I could do another ghost movie," Soderbergh says, "But hopefully I'll turn up with something that's in this space again. You never know, I may do something more pure sci-fi..." Fingers crossed, because it's a pleasure to have his presence in these pages.

Presence is in cinemas from 24 January.



IT'S ALIVE!

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS ROB LETTERMAN AND HILARY WINSTON EXPLAIN HOW THEY GOT TO TURN A BUNCH OF RL STINE CLASSICS INTO **GOOSEBUMPS: THE VANISHING**

WORDS:
TARA BENNETT

THE LAST FEW YEARS HAVE BEEN undeniably great for horror fans. Whether it's on the big screen or streaming, the quality and diversity of output has been impressive. But that means some worthy titles were rather overlooked, like the Disney+ anthology series *Goosebumps*.

Yes, we're referencing the godfather of Young Adult horror, author RL Stine, who's been the horror genre gateway drug for millions of readers since 1992. In the intervening three decades, Stine's works have been turned into an episodic anthology TV series, a 2015 feature directed by Rob Letterman (*Monsters Vs Aliens*) starring Jack Black, and this serialised anthology revival.

Season one of this *Goosebumps* was developed and executive produced by Nicholas Stoller and Letterman, and aired in 2023. While it was picked up for a second season, Letterman and showrunner Hilary Winston were asked by their studio partners to not continue from the cliffhanger at the end of their first season. Instead, they were encouraged to start afresh with new characters and stories based on Stine's library of work.

"When we wrapped our heads around it, *Goosebumps* really is an anthology series," Letterman explains to *SFX* about their new approach. "Every book is different, and they do end on weird twists. They end in this promise of maybe things aren't okay, so it does fit the canon.

"Then there's something really liberating in being able to just start fresh with different monsters and pulling from different books. We love exploring different subgenres of horror and expanding it. We kind of joked around like, 'How scary can a character feel going through another year of bumping into monsters?'

"It's not fresh, so what does this thing turn into? If we're going to capture the initial fear and the universal fear, it made a lot of sense to start with new characters, new story, new world."

CITY OF BAD DREAMS

The result is *Goosebumps: The Vanishing*, which moves the series to Brooklyn to tell a generational tale of missing children, deadly spores and the monsters that hide in the tunnels of New York City.

In the wake of their grandmother having to move into an assisted living facility, siblings Devin (Sam McCarthy) and Cece (Jayden Bartels) agree to relocate there for the summer to help their dad, Anthony (David Schwimmer), clean out the house. In the process, the teens finally uncover more about →

David Schwimmer as botany nerd Anthony.

the unresolved mystery concerning their uncle, who went missing as a teen in 1994.

Letterman and Winston confirm that season two is their original distillation of several Stine books including *The Haunted Car*, *Monster Blood*, *The Girl Who Cried Monster*, *The Ghost Next Door* and *Welcome To Camp Nightmare*, but primarily *Stay Out Of The Basement*.

"It was the origin for this whole season," Winston says of *Basement*, the second book in Stine's original series. "It's a book that [Rob] and I both really loved about a dad going down to his basement obsessed, and he kind of becomes a different person. That can be a metaphor for a lot of different things, like for a parent that is delving too much into work, or alcohol, or whatever."

Winston explains that the story highlighted the different perspective of kids who experience that kind of distance from a parent. "They live in a world where a door can be closed, or they can be told, 'You can't come in here.' For us it was about exploring those feelings, those real-life horrors, but being able to put it in this form of, 'But it's a monster down there!' – or whatever you'll find out is down there. It allows a kid to have those feelings without the reality of it. Adults too, because the majority of our audience are actually adults without kids.

> **"It's about a dad trying to find his way back to being a dad before his kids are grown"**

"Sometimes it's so much easier to sit down and watch a show with a literal insane creature or something, than it is to be like, 'I should talk to my mom more,'" she laughs. "So that's been a real pleasure, to look at real issues that we want to talk about and then being able to kind of decorate them with this horror."

Letterman says they're particularly pleased with how they've made Brooklyn a character this season too, shooting the borough as realistically as possible, which amps up the plausibility of the scares.

"We just run out there with a camera and we go for it. There's something extra terrifying when you're in the regular world, the grounded world, where you recognise everything and see that's how the world is, and then you introduce a supernatural horror thing into that."

Winston adds that the missing persons mystery that happened in 1994 and still haunts the families of the teens involved today is also one that genuinely gave their writers' room the chills. "The storyline from 1994 is what really ties these teens together," she explains. "You have Jen the cop [Ana Ortiz], you have Anthony, and you have this trauma that they experienced as kids.

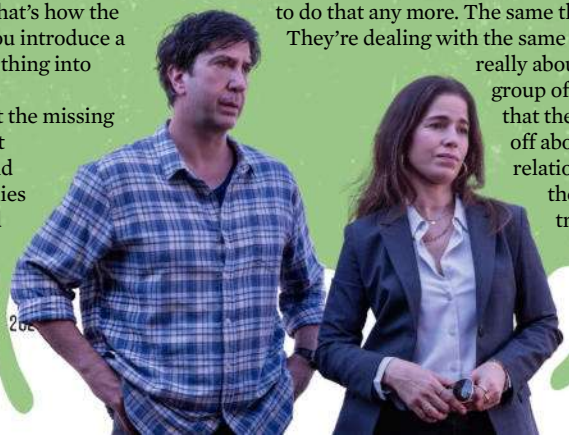
"Then that trauma, if it's not dealt with in the right way, expands out to how they deal with parenting their own children. We really like telling the story that Anthony can't be the dad he wants to be because he hasn't dealt with his brother.

"When you take out all the monsters and horror from this, it's about a dad trying to find his way back to being a dad before his kids are grown and gone, and he doesn't have a chance to do that any more. The same thing with Jen. They're dealing with the same trauma. It's really about this [current] group of kids knowing that there's something off about their relationship with their parents, and trying to get to the bottom of that mystery, so that's what ties them all together."

Helping to convey the depth of that story is former *Friends* actor David Schwimmer, who up until *Goosebumps: The Vanishing* had never done a horror project. Asked if it was an easy sell, Winston laughs and says, "I don't think you ever get Schwimmer with just a 'Yes, I'll do it.' He is so thoughtful about everything he does. Part of casting is you're also making sure that this is a relationship that goes both ways.

"Right away, David's questions were so smart about the character and about the show. His ideas and suggestions were so smart. And he got really into researching botany [the character's science speciality], which was cool.

"From there, it was just talking about, tonally, what the show was," Letterman continues. "He's also directed and he's a storyteller, so he really came at it at a very high level, which was very helpful for us with our crazy schedule. I mean, this is a hard show to make because basically each episode is a movie. It's hard to amortise anything across it, so it's always run and gun.



PICTURES: DISNEY/FRANCISCO ROMAN. STOCK IMAGES: ALEXANDRA TURKINA/GETTY

The kids are alright... for the moment, anyway.

Elijah Cooper and Sam McCarthy go snooping.

"But he really, really loved the idea of doing something grounded and different, unexpected, and playing around with that, and showing a side of New York that no one's seen, because he lives in New York too. Plus, coming up with bad dad jokes about botany," he laughs.

Aside from mixing up the tone in season two, Letterman says he was pretty obsessive about going old school with their horror references this year, and even changing their episodic formatting to embrace horror genre techniques. He says audiences will see homages to everything from John Carpenter's *The Thing* to David Cronenberg's *The Fly* and even Tobe Hooper's *Poltergeist*.

"There's a certain type of horror that we were referencing that is more on the period side, like *Invasion Of The Body Snatchers*," Letterman adds. "We do the deep dive on the older stuff, because it's getting down to the core nature of fear. This was something RL Stine said when he talked to us in season one.

"He's like, 'It's about core fear. It's about fear that all human beings experience. It's about a mask that you put on that you can't get off your head. *That's* scary.' Here, we go to those types of old movies that didn't have all the whizz bang effects back in the day, so they had to get down to the core fear."

Directing alongside Letterman this season are Gillian Robespierre (*Obvious Child*) and Eduardo Sánchez (*The Blair Witch Project*). "In episode six, we wanted to do a found footage episode just to try that genre. That's where we needed some serious expertise," Letterman says. "We literally said, 'Do you think we could get the director of *The Blair Witch Project*?'" Winston continues. And then there we were having a Zoom with him. It was amazing and a dream.

"But that's one thing that we definitely did this year: make sure that each director that we chose was really the right person for their episode so that they had time and they could know the story, and they weren't just thrown into something. All of them knew ahead of time that this is your genre, and this is what you're doing."

Excited for audiences to finally see what they've been cooking up in these eight new episodes, Winston and Letterman hope they hit the sweet spot for both old and new horror fans – and they promise that this will be a self-contained story.

"The way the books work, they end on a twist oftentimes," Letterman says. "Things aren't all wrapped up in a tidy bow at the end of a *Goosebumps* book, so that's really how we end the seasons. We end with a twist that promises more stuff, but it really is the ending of that story and then we're pencils down. Our brains just stop. It's like 'The End'. Sure, it *could* continue, but who knows?"

Looking ahead, Winston says she's got a whole tote bag full of Stine books that they want to adapt which she lugs around. She even floats that, given a third season, *The Abominable Snowman Of Pasadena* is on the top of her list to get made...

Goosebumps: The Vanishing is on Disney+ from 10 January.

SCREENWRITER MICHAEL GRAIS REVEALS HOW POLTERGEIST II OVERCAME A CURSED SET, A DIRECTOR AT ODDS WITH THE SPECIAL EFFECTS TEAM, AND TERMINALLY ILL ACTORS

WORDS: **OLIVER PFEIFFER**

RELEASED FOUR YEARS after director Tobe Hooper and co-writer/producer Steven Spielberg's 1982 supernatural smash hit, *Poltergeist II: The Other Side* reunited screenwriters Michael Grais and Mark Victor and most of the key cast. It centres once again on supernatural forces plaguing the everyday Freeling family, after they relocate to another neighbourhood following the destruction of their original home.

"We decided that they would go and live with Diane's [JoBeth Williams] mother because Steve [Craig T Nelson] completely lost his job selling real estate, and he was also having a drinking problem," *Poltergeist II* co-writer/producer Grais tells SFX. "In this film, Steve takes over and is more present, while with *Poltergeist*, it was more Diane's show."

If ever an antagonist dominated a horror film despite even less screen time than Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence Of The Lambs*, it was the unforgettable elderly Reverend Henry Kane in *Poltergeist II*. As portrayed by ailing, skeletal-faced actor Julian Beck (who passed away shortly after production), the softly spoken yet utterly unnerving cult leader – revealed here as the source of the threat in the first film – instantly elevated this 1986 horror sequel.

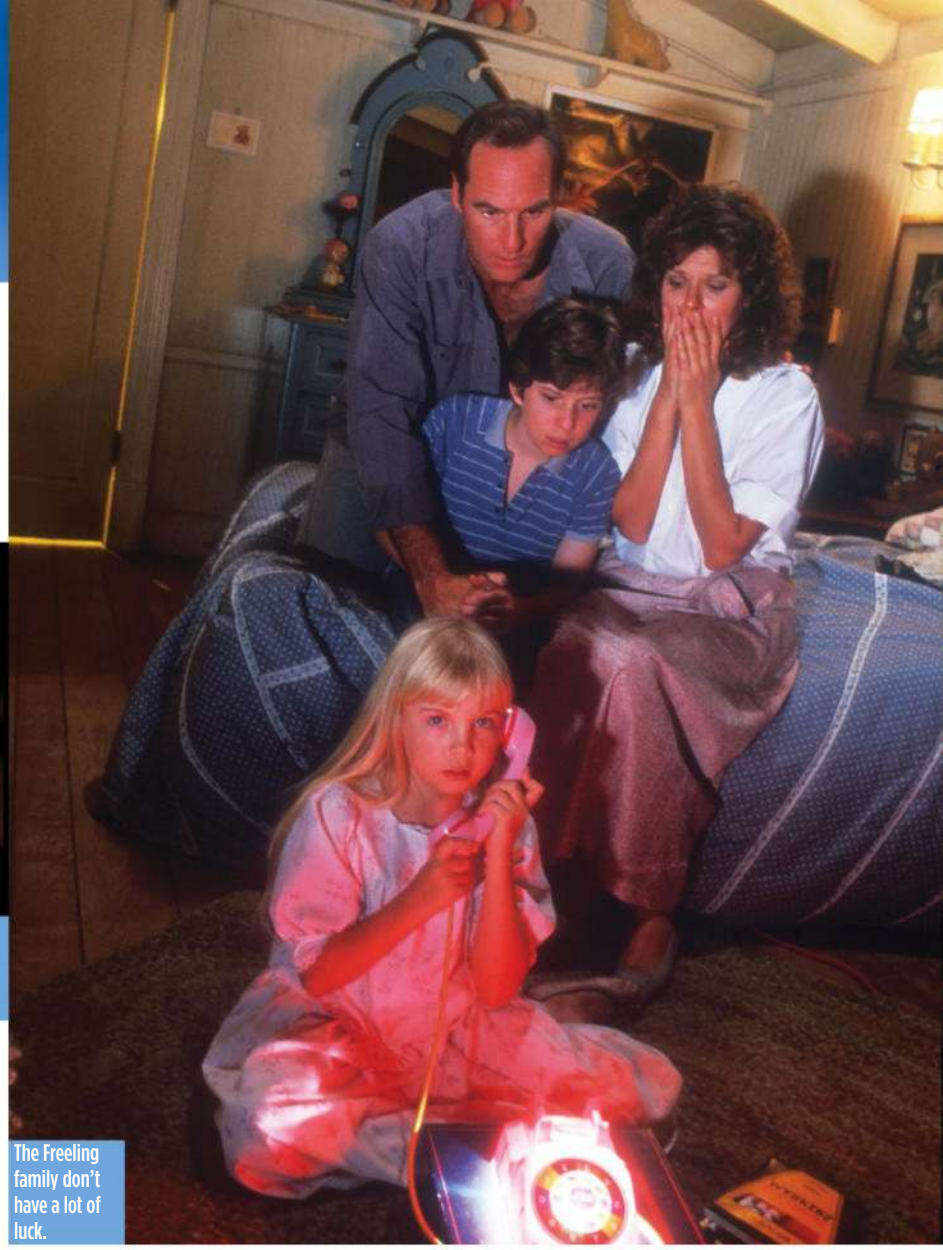
Julian Beck as the Rev Henry Kane. He's not nice.

"I had seen Julian Beck with the Living Theatre when I was in college in Lima, Peru, and I was always impressed with him, his abilities, his karma, and everything else. So when he was suggested for the part, I just jumped at it, and nobody else was considered," says Grais.

"I thought it was a great idea, and because he was suffering [from cancer], he couldn't get insured, so we insured him. We knew he was dying at the time. However, he was very alive and very grateful for the part. He came to the set with his wife and his boyfriend – he was a livewire!"

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the character's attire and penchant for singing hymns, Grais based malevolent spirit Kane on the equally menacing, black hat-wearing preacher Harry Powell, as played to perfection by Robert Mitchum in Charles Laughton's iconic 1955 noir thriller *The Night Of The Hunter*.

Arguably, the most iconic sequence from *Poltergeist II* remains Kane's chilling door-calling encounter with the Freelings, where the evil preacher goes into a lengthy monologue about the family being in mortal danger before pleading, "Let me in!" The scene is all the more effective for capturing the afflicted actor's authentically gaunt appearance.



The Freeling family don't have a lot of luck.

Oliver Robins and Heather O'Rourke as the kids.

"The scene at the door where he's telling them that 'They're going to die' ['in there!'] – that was shot at two different times that were just a few weeks apart, and the effects of his disease had taken their toll in those few weeks," reveals Grais. "So it looked like a special effect with his face changing, but it was just the fact that we shot it at two different times."

Speaking of special effects, Swiss surrealist artist and acclaimed *Alien* designer HR Giger was hired to conceptualise the subsequent Kane/the Beast manifestation creatures – including the hideous worm demon that emerges out of possessed Steve Freeling's mouth and slithers away.

"That was a no-brainer, he's a great creator," Grais says of Giger. "He was there for pre-production for the preliminary sketches of things in California, but wasn't on-set at all. We just gave him the reins, and he ran with it."

However, British director Brian Gibson, predominantly known for helming music videos at the time, was apparently out of his depth with the effects-laden production. "The studio put Brian onto the picture. He was supposed to be on another picture, and a producer put him on our movie to get rid of him. Hollywood politics!" says Grais.

"He didn't understand the way special effects worked, so when shots were set up a certain way, and the camera had to be in a certain place to shoot that scene, he would be moving the scene around right before they were ready to shoot.

"He and [visual effects supervisor] Richard Edlund were at each other's throats. So a lot of special effects shots got screwed up. This was a big budget at that time, and he was over his head. Everyone knew what they were doing except Brian. Unfortunately, there was no Spielberg standing behind him."

Apart from the special effects woes, there was also another issue – one that perhaps had a supernatural basis... This was particularly

G-g-g-ghosts! There's just no getting away from them.

prevalent during the filming of the studio-shot flashback scene where Kane encourages his followers to commit suicide in a cavern beneath the Freelings' original home. "The set had a lot of [real] skeletons on it, and when we went to shoot the scene, the camera flew off the rig, and people were sliding off the mountains – it was a nightmare!" reveals Grais.

"So I went up to Will Sampson [who played Native American shaman Taylor] and said, 'What's going on?' and he said, 'The skeletons aren't happy!' I said, 'How do we make them happy?'. He replied, 'Tell the guard to let me in tonight, and I will take care of it!' The next day, there was no problem."

Sadly, Sampson, a real-life shaman, passed away a year following the film's release. Grais assures us that this didn't have any connection to the alleged "*Poltergeist* curse" which saw the tragic and untimely deaths of several cast members, including the murder of Dominique Dunne, who played teenage daughter Dana in the original.

> **"Everybody came in and said they were Indians. Even Dennis Hopper came in"**

"[Sampson] died of black lung disease, which he had contracted before the movie. Like Julian, he came onto the set already passing away," he says. "He was great, solid as oak. We interviewed everybody [for that role], and everybody came in and said they were Indians. Even Dennis Hopper came in and said he was an Indian! Everybody wanted to play that character, but then Will came in, and it was a no-brainer. It was his part."

Regrettably, problems with the production didn't end with the exorcising of spirits. A questionable denouement involving the Freelings entering the titular astral plane, and a ceremonial spear impaling the beastly manifestation of Kane, resulted in laughable results that were at odds with Grais's original written ending.

"It was our first production, so we were green; otherwise, we wouldn't have been [talked into doing] the flying sequence," says the writer.

"Edlund talked us into it; he had the flying rigs, and he wanted to use them. We had written a different ending that was more like *What Dreams May Come*, which came out later but turned out to have a lot of similarities. He talked us out of that and into the flying stuff. That was a nightmare. It was just bad."

In addition, MGM hired arts supervisor John Bruno to undertake a comprehensive reshoot due to the initial film's apparent lack of suspense and terror. "Brian edited it without any scares, so we were very involved in editing, reshoots, and rewriting – it was a bit of a mess," explains Grais.

"My thoughts [following the reshoots] were that the last reel with the flying sequences ruined the movie. Everything else I thought was terrific. I thought Craig T Nelson's performance was fantastic."

THEY'RE BACK!

Despite a critical panning, *Poltergeist II: The Other Side* did reasonable business at the box office, and was even awarded an Oscar nomination for best visual effects. It later became a cult classic largely thanks to Beck's powerhouse performance as Kane. Yet when talk turned to the inevitable follow-up, Grais and his co-writer Mark Victor lacked the enthusiasm to return.

"They asked us to be involved after the opening weekend, came to our office and said, 'How would you like to do the third movie?' We said, 'Absolutely no!' We had had enough *Poltergeists*! We were tired," laughs Grais.

Nevertheless, despite Beck's death, the character of Kane returned for 1988's *Poltergeist III*, which focused squarely on the haunting of daughter Carol Anne – reprised once again by Heather O'Rourke, with Zelda Rubinstein also returning as eccentric medium Tangina.

Corey Burton, who had voiced Kane in ADR following Beck's passing in the sequel, also returned to lend his vocals. Unfortunately, the Gary Sherman-directed film was similarly plagued by problems, mainly concerning the ambitious and time-consuming live "in camera" special effects.

Significantly, the ending also had to undergo a reshoot with a faceless stand-in for Carol Anne, following the tragic death of 12-year-old O'Rourke from congenital stenosis during post-production.

A remake of the original, featuring Sam Rockwell and directed by Gil Kenan, surfaced in 2015. It's largely been forgotten – which perhaps indicates just how authentic, profoundly atmospheric and uniquely chilling the first two *Poltergeist* films continue to be.

Poltergeist II: The Other Side is available on Blu-ray.

PHOTO12/ALAMY, GETTY

Ma and pa, Craig T Nelson and JoBeth Williams.

Kids are never off their phones, are they?

"THEY'RE HERE!"

We consider the most memorable scenes from the original trilogy

POLTERGEIST (1982)
Whether or not you believe producer Steven Spielberg was the true guiding force behind this Tobe Hooper-directed classic, there's no denying both filmmakers brought something significant to the table. The classic scene where Carol Anne awakens to a static TV that spits out a supernatural entity before she creepily proclaims to her family "They're here!" remains a spine-tingling introduction.

POLTERGEIST II: THE OTHER SIDE (1986)
While the chilling Kane house-calling scene is iconic, the character's initial introduction in an outdoor shopping centre is arguably as disturbing. The sinister spectral figure emerges, spectrally walking through people, before encountering a briefly abandoned Carol Anne and enquiring "Are you lost, sweetheart? Are you afraid, honey? Well, why don't you come with me?" Never speak to strangers, kids!

POLTERGEIST III (1988)
The canny use of mirror surfaces within the confined urban tower block setting opens the portals that bring back the malevolent spirit Kane (Nathan Davis) for this second sequel. The original family dynamic is sorely missed; however, the clever in-camera effects are of merit, including the memorable introduction of multiple Kanes ominously reflected in the doorways of a hall of mirrors.

THE WORST WITCH

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

MAYFAIR WITCHES SHOWRUNNER ESTA SPALDING REVEALS HOW THEY'RE MINING ANNE RICE'S

LIVES OF THE MAYFAIR WITCHES TRILOGY FOR SEASON TWO AND THE BROADER IMMORTAL UNIVERSE

WHEN IT COMES to "out there" cliffhangers, the season one finale of AMC's *Mayfair Witches* ranks up there with the all-timers.

Adapting Anne Rice's *The Witching Hour*, season one establishes how seemingly ordinary neurosurgeon Rowan Fielding (Alexandra Daddario) discovers that she's actually the heiress to the Mayfair dynasty of witches – the 13th such designee. She becomes the latest witch haunted by the ancient evil entity known as Lasher (Jack Huston), who seduces and impregnates her by the finale.

In that, Rowan finds herself in the ancestral Mayfair family mausoleum, where in a matter of hours, her pregnancy gestates to full term. Through visions, Rowan discovers that her baby will be the new vessel for Lasher.

To summarise: Rowan had sex with the evil entity who is now going to be her son. If you're already an Anne Rice devotee, you'll know that kind of crazy is de rigueur for her special brand of supernatural storytelling: full of tragedy, romance, kinky bits and interconnected mythology. Developed and showrun by Esta Spalding (*Masters Of Sex*), *Mayfair Witches* returns two years after that shocking finale with a more focused approach to Rowan and Lasher's intertwined destinies.

Aware of some criticism regarding season one, Spalding tells *SFX* that Rice's Lives Of The Mayfair Witches trilogy has an abundance of stories and characters that they've streamlined even more this season.

"There were all of the conversations about how to make the show better," Spalding says, referring to their writers' room and producers. "At the core of it, we just felt so strongly that this is the story of Rowan and Lasher, so we followed that throughline: this strange Anne Rice-y lover who becomes a son.

"Rowan is the mother, but also navigating her old feelings for this spirit who both tormented her and also loved and seduced her. That relationship lives in the heart and soul of this second season."

Spalding says the spine of season two is based on Rice's second book, *Lasher*, along with some Mayfair family history they held back from season one. As such, this season dives into the Scottish history of the Mayfairs, so the production actually travelled to Scotland to shoot those sequences that flesh out the cursed connection between the original witches and Lasher.

"The first thing, honestly, I remember doing in the writers' room was all of us sitting there saying, 'What were the set-pieces that you love from this second book?' because we're not going to be able to use it all," Spalding says of their process in breaking this season.

"Also, to be completely frank, we know that there's [book] material that we just wouldn't use now. It's not of our world at this moment and it doesn't give us a strong female lead with Rowan's actions in a lot of places in the book. So we're talking about set-pieces."

Alexandra Daddario (left) returns as Rowan.

Moira (Alyssa Jirrels) realises she's out of juice.

Things they determined as "must-haves" include the exploration of how Cortland Mayfair (Harry Hamlin) became the monster he is at the hands of his manipulative father, Julien Mayfair (Ted Levine); folding in the characters of tarot reader Gifford Mayfair (Thora Birch) and mind reader Moira Mayfair (Alyssa Jirrels); and the broader mythology of who and what the Taltos are.

All of those decisions allowed them to dig into answering the question of how the Mayfair family dynamic works. "This is a family that's been described as a matriarchy, and yet it's a family in which women have been murdered and slaughtered over and over again," Spalding points out.

"If Rowan's going to assume leadership of it, she needs to understand what it was, and try to figure out how to make it something else. So that's the challenge of the season, and that's her challenge in terms of her leadership of the family."

Spalding says the criticism levied at them – that they churned through plot so quickly that character moments were sacrificed – was noted and addressed this year. "There were conversations about how to make the show feel more lived-in, more character-driven, to really be with Rowan this season," she says.

"We asked ourselves how do we fight, in a really tight shooting schedule, for these moments where we're alone with her and we're seeing how she feels about this new position in the family?" Spalding explains. "How many new characters do we create from the family? How much do we owe of their points of view to be able to really feel *who* Rowan is in the family, and the challenges of leading that family and so on?"

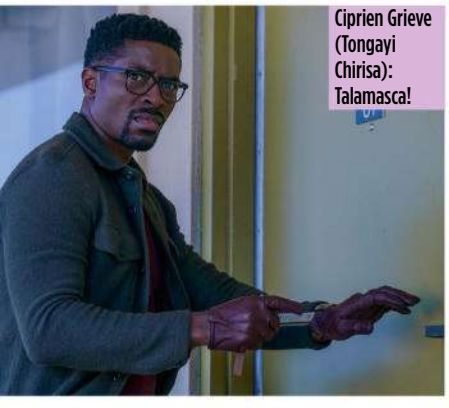
As for the Rowan and Lasher of it all, Spalding says, "What's beautiful in Anne Rice's formulation, and really was compelling for all of us, was that question of, if Rowan's power is bound to him, but he's destroying people and killing people, is she willing to kill him? Will she really destroy him? She has moments, even in our first episode, where she's thinking, 'How do I feel about this? This is a child. I'm the mother. I feel all these maternal things, and yet I know I've kind of built a bomb, in a way.'"

> **"There were conversations about how to make the show feel more lived-in"**

Spalding says they've really framed Rowan to be a detective this season with regards to discovering the depths of her own powers and how to use them to control Lasher.

"She has inherited both the power to heal and the power to destroy, all in her control of the elements. So she's asking, 'How much am I going to use this dark, dark, dark, destructive power? How much am I going to tell myself it's because I want the healing power?'

"That's very deeply in Anne Rice's novel, and that was the central psychological drama being played out for Rowan. She's using her mental →



Ciprien Grieve (Tongayi Chirisa): Talamasca!

Cortland Mayfair (Harry Hamlin) gets desperate.

Lasher (Jack Huston): look, it's complicated...

Cip and Albrecht (Dennis Boutsikaris).

abilities and using her witchy abilities to figure out where he is and why he's doing what he's doing," Spalding continues. "We knew that that was the first four episodes of this season and then there would be this turn..."

Not wanting to spoil things, Spalding just adds that returning Talamasca agent Ciprien Grieve (Tongayi Chirisa) and new witch Moira will factor heavily into that arc.

"The most exciting new tool in our Mayfair toolbox is Moira," Spalding underlines. "We're bringing in somebody who doesn't buy the family mythology, who's the opposite of Dolly Jean [Charlayne Woodard], who can't stand all of the lore about Lasher.

"She reads it in a kind of Gen Z way. She's younger and a mind reader, so she comes by it honestly. She can hear the thoughts of the people in the family, so she knows the way in which there's a kind of brainwashing that goes on when you're a Mayfair."

"Everything we know of the past of the Mayfairs is still there to be delved into"

Spalding calls Moira a "very formidable witch", and that creates friction as soon as she comes into Rowan's orbit. "Rowan acknowledges Moira's power, but she's also terrified of what Moira might discover," she says. "She's worried that she can't lie in front of Moira.

"She's worried that she can't use all of her powers of persuasion, because of what she's thinking. That plays out as it does, but it's really exciting to watch them wrangle and ultimately become allies."

As for the aforementioned Ciprien and his Talamasca woes that carry through to this season, Spalding says the character is on a journey to find his *own* answers.

"He's a company guy who's a little bit like the Mayfairs. He's a little bit brainwashed by the Talamasca. He believes what they say. He was raised by them. He was brought in very, very early, and he has to come to terms with how he feels about this organisation and his place in the organisation. Ultimately, all of it plays out through a story about his relationship to Lasher, his hate for Lasher, and his discovery of what Lasher is."

Cip's Talamasca position also provides the latest link in the ever-growing AMC Immortal Universe, which connects the events and characters of *Interview With The Vampire*, *Mayfair Witches* and the forthcoming 2025 series *Talamasca*.

Spalding says their season two writers' room welcomed *Talamasca* showrunner Mark Lafferty into the fold. "He came in to help us break the last three episodes of the season, and he wrote episode seven, which is very Talamasca-heavy," she reveals. "It's the episode where a lot changes for Cip in terms of his relationship to the organisation and his understanding of the organisation. Mark was very much a part of the conversations about that in our show, and was beginning to think about working on the *Talamasca* series.

"I feel like he helped us shape that story, which is the story of the European Talamasca. Then he moved off to run *Talamasca*, carrying everything that we'd figured out into his vision of the world."

Without a season three pick-up confirmed for *Mayfair Witches* yet, Spalding says that

"Families, eh? You can't live with them, you can't..."

Sam (Ben Feldman) has got a real fancy 'puter.

PICTURES: SKIP BOLEN/AMC. STOCK ELEMENTS: GREENGAPHY/GETTY

audiences showing up for this season will determine if they get to complete their adaptation of Rice's Mayfair trilogy. But she can't help thinking about what they'd do with, say, Julien's character going forward, or about pulling forward the history of the Mayfairs from the first book.

"Everything we know of the past of the Mayfairs is still there to be delved into and pulled into the series," she says of what she's still excited to tell. "Those riches, those backstories, the history that's in both the first two books is something that we can use again and again.

"Just like with the first season, there are moments and beats in season two that we reach that are at the end of Anne Rice's *Lasher* book. We felt committed to getting to those, and they do open doors for things that come later. But you know what happens when you walk through that doorway.

"I think it's gonna require both devotion to the original material and also invention. It's a really exciting prospect."

Mayfair Witches is on AMC in the US from 5 January. UK details are TBC.

AGENT OF CHANGE

Tongayi Chirisa plays Ciprien Grieve, the betrayed Talamasca agent who must find his own path this season

Ciprien continues to be a relatively compassionate and good character among a whole lot of evil. Do you see him that way?

Absolutely. I think it was critical and vital to have a centrepiece, I would say. Somebody who is grounded and not affected in the sense of the "other" world. Somebody who's connected to it, but he's still discovering who he is in the midst of it all. Cip's journey, which is weird in a sense, is that he's still trying to figure out who he is.

I think just as a person, when you read the book, it's very heavy and very dark, so there was a consciousness to try and be a beacon of light and anchor, or some sort of pathway to sanity and to hope.

Even though we are the Talamasca, that we observe and we only intervene when we need to, we can still ground you and get you to a place where it doesn't freak you out too much. I think that's exactly who Cip is.

By the end of season one, Cip is betrayed by his Talamasca boss, Albrecht, and rejected by Rowan. How does that set him up for this season?

Going into season two, a lot of things start to unravel. The very foundation that he thought he could lean on with the Talamasca and Albrecht suddenly have left him out in the cold. Now, for a time, we start to see him having an autonomy of thoughts. Where that goes, he's not even sure because it's all about self-discovery and peeling back this onion that Ciprien is.

What is his compass now?

What I appreciate about Ciprien's character is his integrity to the mission. Despite his emotional situation with Rowan and how he might feel about Albrecht and the Talamasca, his mission is to fulfill the mandate. I think that is his one "golden compass" that he will follow throughout. From that, we start to see this new emerging Cip that's going to come out from whatever adventure that season two holds for him.

Cip seeks an ally in Moira Mayfair, who can read minds and hates Lasher too. Is that wise?

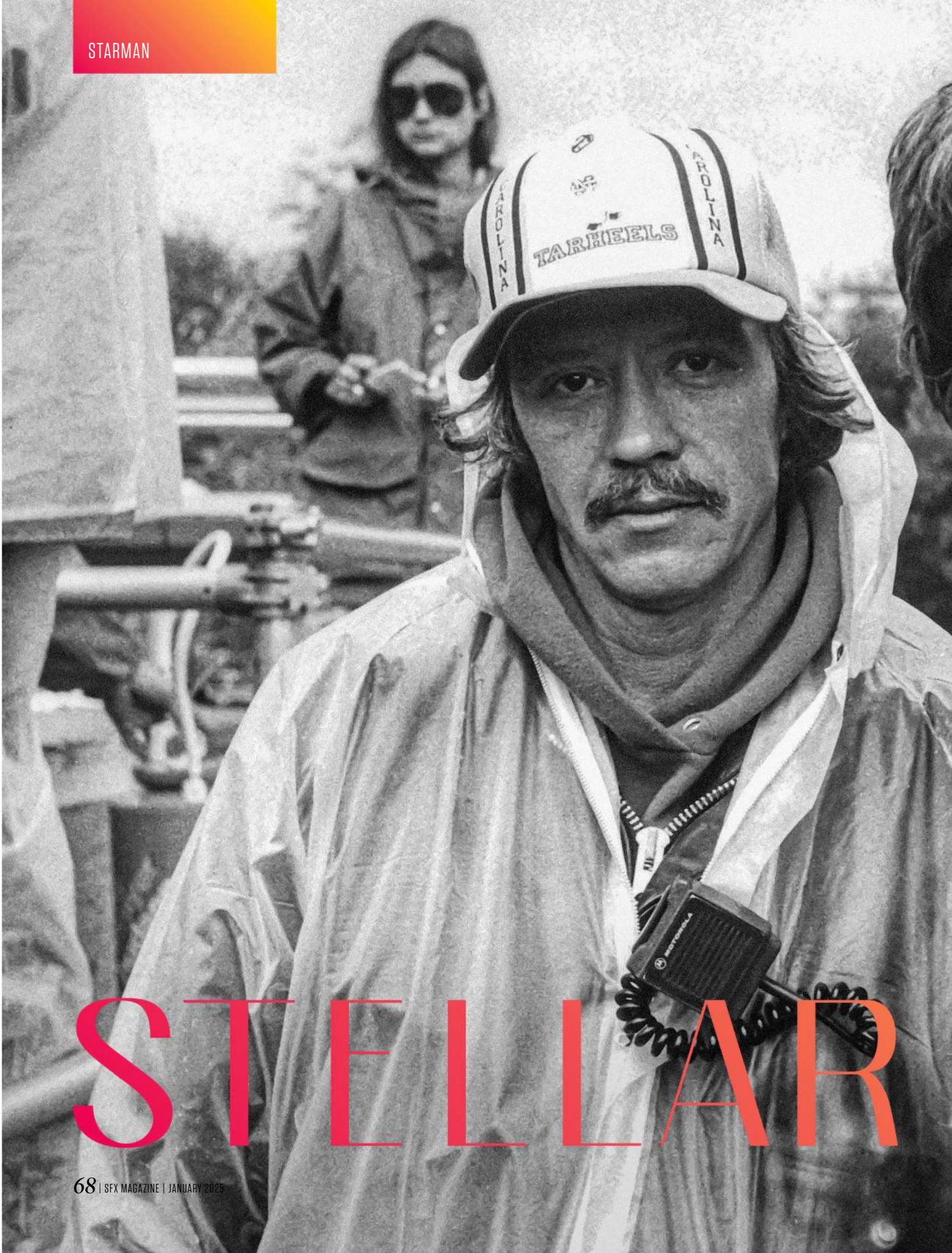
Ciprien does not trust the Mayfair family. He's been burnt a couple of times, flown through walls and weird stuff, so he's kind of hesitant. But I think the shifting has happened now because he's aware of what the Mayfairs can potentially be and do to him – he knows that he has to have a connection with them.

It's obviously re-strategising the way that he approaches Alyssa's character, Moira, in the sense that it's like, "Look, this is business. Let's work together to figure this thing out, because we're all going for the same thing. We need answers, and it's better together than to be apart."

I think that's how he approaches Moira in the second season, minus the [potential] romance, like, "Oh, *this* could be something." It's like, "Nah, we're not going to use that angle." He saw what happened the last time.

Should we expect big things happening to Cip by season's end?

As the actor, I got giddy about where we're going with Ciprien's character and the things that unfold moving forward. It's massive for Cip's journey and what that entails for the Talamasca, who he is and where that's going.



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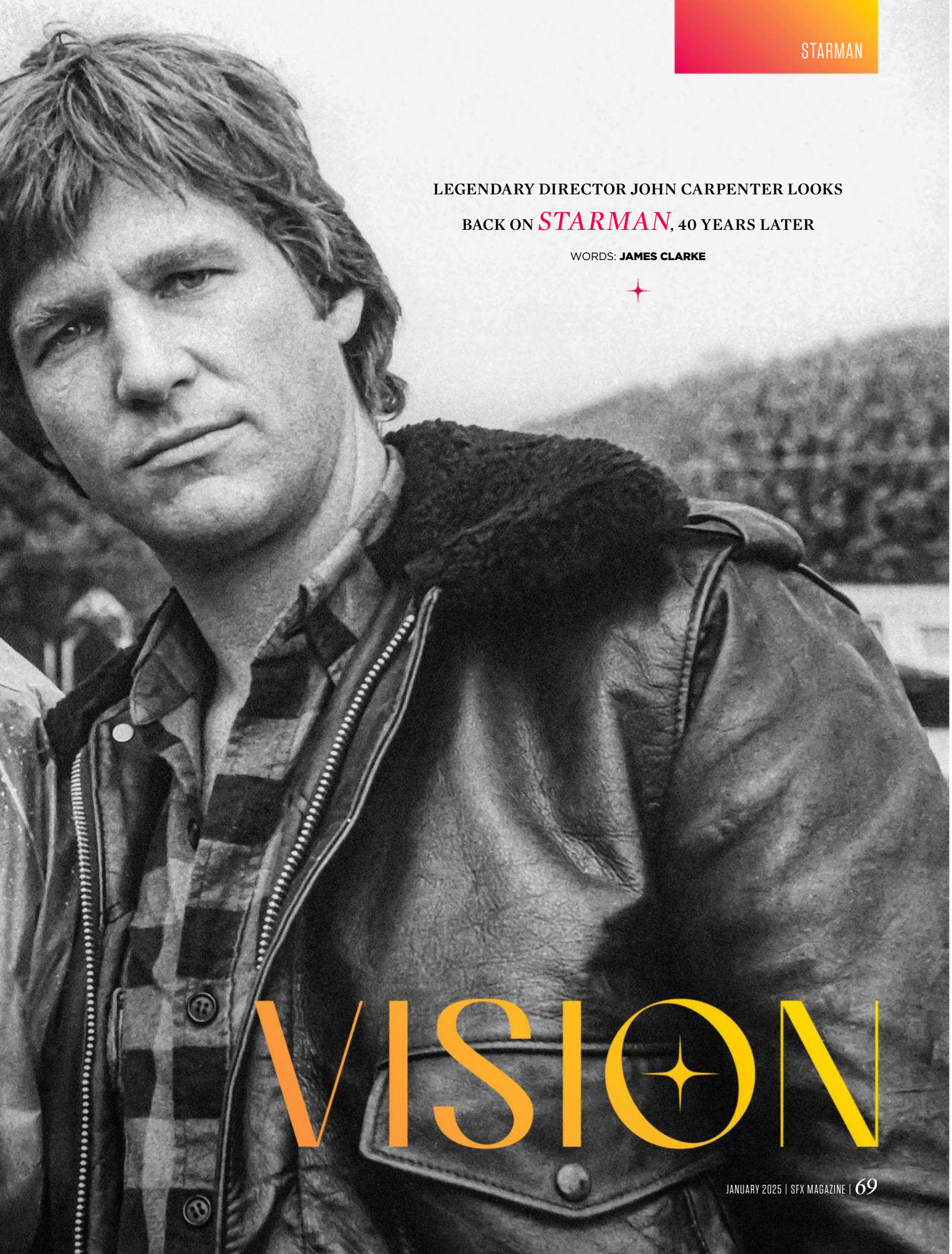


VISION

LEGENDARY DIRECTOR JOHN CARPENTER LOOKS BACK ON *STARMAN*, 40 YEARS LATER

WORDS: **JAMES CLARKE**

Charles Martin Smith as scientist Mark Shermin.

Jenny (Karen Allen) shows the Starman around town.

The stars on set with director John Carpenter.

THERE'S SOME SHARED WISDOM THAT says that a classic story is one that's never quite finished with what it has to say to us. That's a fair definition of John Carpenter's filmography, and certainly of *Starman*, which recently celebrated its 40th anniversary. It was a film that tapped into a sustained moment in the '70s and '80s when the real world of American space exploration fused with moviemakers' imaginations.

"When I was a kid, I loved SF and horror movies," Carpenter tells *SFX*. "Science fiction books, literature, short stories: I just fell in love with that stuff." He adds emphatically, with a smile, "That was *my stuff*." A key entry in the "stuff" that fired Carpenter's imagination was the 1953 movie *It Came From Outer Space*.

A graduate of USC Film School in Los Angeles, Carpenter got to work as a filmmaker with his cherished genres of science fiction and horror in *Dark Star* and then with *Halloween*.

He followed these two entries with *The Fog*, *Escape From New York*, *The Thing*, *Christine* and *Big Trouble in Little China*. Among this dazzling run of flinty, visceral and kinetic genre movies was the gentler entry, *Starman*, released in December 1984.

LOVING THE ALIEN

"This was an assignment I got from Columbia Pictures," Carpenter says of *Starman*. "They had a project, and they couldn't lick it. They couldn't figure a way to make it and they were looking for somebody to do it. I suppose because it was a kind of adult *ET*.

"That was a big hit for Steven Spielberg and so they wanted to cash in on that. For some bizarre reason, luckily for me, they chose me. This was an opportunity, and I don't get many of these, to do a romantic comedy; a road movie. And boy, I jumped at it. So that's how it began."

Of the creative scope that he had on the movie, Carpenter recalls that he developed the screenplay – written by Bruce A Evans and Raynold Gideon – that he had been engaged to work from, so as to refine it further and make it ready for him to work from. Carpenter notes, though, that "the script was really excellent, and I didn't have to do much work."

Starman was a notably more adult variation on a science fiction scenario that had become popular in the early '80s, and that had tended to skew towards younger audiences, in which some sort of otherworldly visitor makes contact with humans.

Carpenter recalls Columbia wanting to emphasise the science fiction aspect of the premise, and how he responded to the studio head. "I said, 'Just be honest about what it is: it's a love story.' Put Jeff and Karen up there [on the poster]. And that's what we did."

Karen Allen and Jeff Bridges took the starring roles, as the widow Jenny Hayden and the incorporeal alien visitor who creates a cloned body of her late husband to inhabit. Bridges had been an emerging movie star in the previous decade, with roles in films that included *Tron* and the Western *Heaven's Gate*, while Allen had become familiar to many from her starring role in *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*.

Of his collaboration with the pair, Carpenter tells *SFX*, "It was wonderful. Karen, I met in New York. She was initially a stage actress and had done some movie work. I just loved working with her. And Jeff, I had known from movies.

"He had just done *Against All Odds*, a remake of *Out Of The Past*. It was the first time he'd had a good kind of 'I'm a handsome movie star' role. Jeff's his own person and he's his own actor and he really wanted to tackle this role. So we had a great, great time. I love Jeff very much."

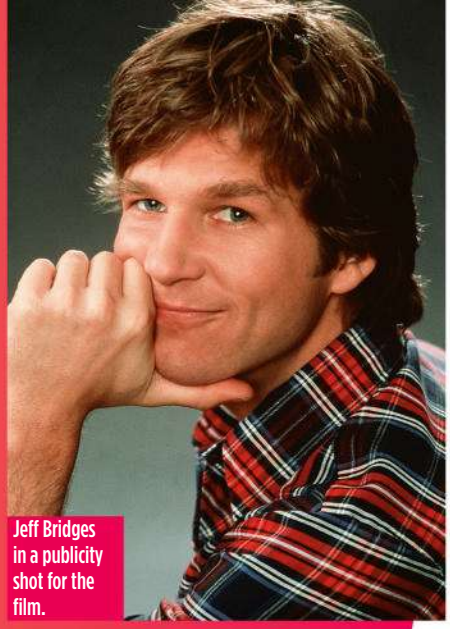
The movie is marked by a strain of melancholy, centred around the character of Jenny Hayden. Contrastingly, there's a sense of the childlike in the character of Starman. There's potential menace in the Starman, too. Carpenter recalls how his collaboration with

BALANCING SPECTACLE

For visual effects studio ILM, there was a challenge in creating the plausible SF elements of *Starman*

When *Starman* was made, optical visual effects remained the standard approach to visual effects work, with the digital era just beginning to emerge. Optical effects were key to the small palette of effects work that topped and tailed the movie. Of Industrial Light & Magic's work on *Starman*, Carpenter recalls, "There wasn't much to do. The biggest thing for ILM [to create] was that craft at the end. What I wanted to do was make it completely reflective and they kind of struggled with that. We didn't emphasise the effects. It wasn't first and foremost on my mind and it wasn't presented that way. It was all in service of the comedy and the romance."

COLUMBIA/KOBAL/SHUTTERSTOCK, GETTY; COLLECTION CHRISTOPHEL/ALAMY STOCK IMAGES; GUNTUR SEPTYAN/GETTY



Jeff Bridges in a publicity shot for the film.

Keep those objects strategically placed...

No babies were harmed. They were made, though.

It's a road trip sci-fi rom com thriller! Not bad.

Bridges and Allen brought the character dynamic that was present in the screenplay all the more to life through the actors' performances. "That's what we brought to the screen. Karen fleshed it out. We had rehearsals for two weeks, so she fleshed out her character, as did Jeff. They came from different [acting] perspectives.

"Karen's character was a widow so she had kind of a built-in melancholy. She had a sadness about life. But Jeff was a blank slate.

"He was so great," he laughs. "He had a picture of a hawk on his script cover; a bird, fearsome. That was kind of his go to: if you watch his performance, you see it; he's kind of birdlike. Amazing stuff. Jeff got nominated [for an Oscar]."

The third focal character in the film is SETI scientist Mark Shermin, portrayed by Charles

> **"This was an opportunity, and I don't get many of these, to do a romantic comedy"**

Martin Smith. Carpenter has fond memories of working with the actor. "I love Charlie. He was just terrific. Charlie anchored the movie. He was the guy who was searching for the truth. He was a very benevolent person; there was a kindness to him and there's a kindness to him as an actor. I was lucky. I had a great cast. They were ready to go all the time; to travel across country. It was memorable in terms of making this film.

"They're all very different from their characters," he adds. "They're pros. Every day they were ready to go."

Key to the compelling performances showcased in *Starman* is the way that the film emphasises so much about the characters' relationships and reactions to their situation without recourse to dialogue. "I don't think we left out any dialogue," Carpenter notes, "that's what was there. But a lot of it was non-verbal; especially with Jeff, because [as Starman] he was learning to be human."

A key element of the science fiction aspect of the story was the scene early on in which Starman is born. It's very much dependent on a close-up of Jenny Hayden witnessing the moment, but there are a few fleeting shots that have something of the horror movie about them. Carpenter recalls the work that Dick Smith, Rick Baker and Stan Winston did.

"In the birth scene, there are a couple of little deals that required Rick Baker and Dick Smith – there are two or three shots; it really wasn't much. We didn't showcase visual effects: just enough to tell the story and move on. It wasn't about that. It wasn't about being show-off, or how cool we could be. It was very simple stuff."

In editing the film, little of the footage shot was not included in the final cut. "There wasn't much at all," Carpenter says. "Once we had the movie together, it was really about fine-tuning the performance and that's very delicate work. Marion Rothman was my editor – a really fabulous editor." In part, this was about allowing non-verbal performance details to shine through. "Jeff would say, 'There's some magic in some takes.' It's just when everything comes together: the actor, the lighting... several of those moments when we'd say, 'Look at that.'"

Carpenter had worked with his DP Don Morgan on *Christine* and together they sought to showcase the distinct characteristics first of the midwestern landscape and then of the desert terrain of the American southwest.

A CHANGE OF HEART

Carpenter notes that Jeff Bridges and Karen Allen continue to be approached about the film. "I know that Jeff talks about more to the story, what they [the characters] would do. They both have fond memories of the movie. All that work, all the slugging away out there in the wilderness of the US.

"It paid off for us. It's a very heartfelt movie. *That's* the movie I wanted to make. I went to film school and I saw everything that was available to me, and one of them was *It Happened One Night*. That's a great road movie and this was my chance to make something along those lines. That's where it lands."

Now that the film is marking its fortieth anniversary, how does Carpenter see the movie in the wider context of his filmography? "I thought about it in my career and the way it went. I was doing a lot of horror science fiction films and then this came along. I just embraced it because I thought, 'I won't get this chance again because it's not what I'm known for.' And I'm *really* glad I did.

"I'm happy. I'm very proud of the movie. We worked very hard on it. I've no idea how people took it. You're obviously still talking about it, so that's a plus. People come up to me and talk about it sometimes." Carpenter pauses and then exclaims: "Forty years! Wow!"

Certainly, Carpenter recognises the film as part of the bigger picture of his career and notes that "It's the kinder, gentler side of John Carpenter. Those opportunities don't come along very often. The ferocious side was *The Thing* and this was the opposite."

Starman is on Prime Video and Blu-ray.

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JANUARY 2025

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edited by Ian Berriman

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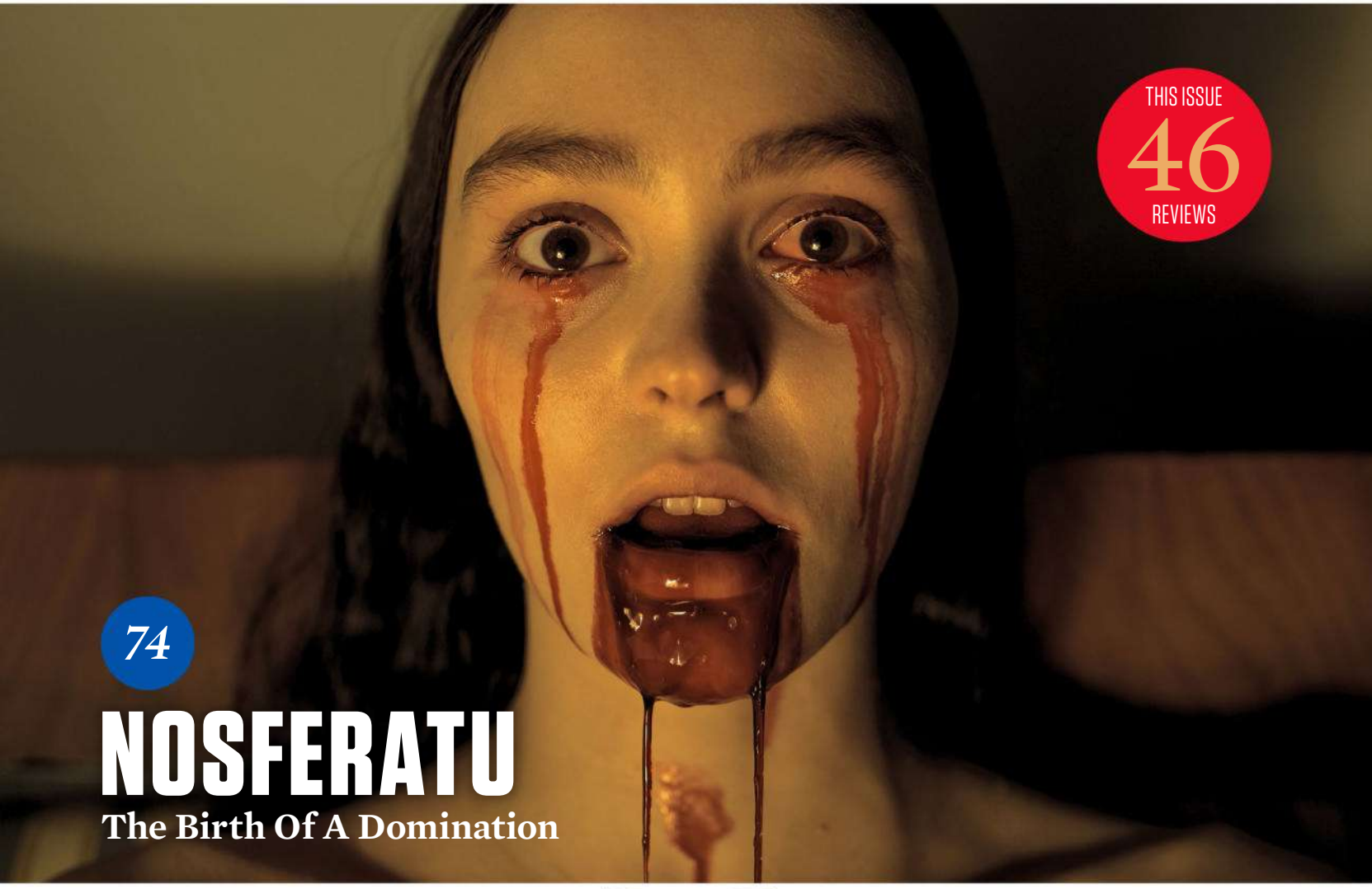

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NOSFERATU

Thrall Shook Up

SFX Loves

★★★★★

RELEASED 1 JANUARY

15 | 132 minutes

Director **Robert Eggers**

Cast **Bill Skarsgård, Nicholas Hoult, Lily-Rose Depp, Aaron Taylor-Johnson, Emma Corrin, Willem Dafoe**

Remaking a property is tricky enough in normal circumstances. In the case of *Nosferatu*, it's doubly complicated. FW Murnau's 1922 silent film was, notoriously, a knock-off of *Dracula*, with character names changed, and the plot simplified but essentially the same.

So in resurrecting it Robert Eggers was creating something not only comparable to a famous forebear, but which could feel like a retread of the most well-known vampire story of all time. It's a measure of his success that this febrile gothic horror, which seems to teeter on the brink of a plunge into insanity throughout, is a film with its own distinct identity.

Eggers builds upon elements appended to Bram Stoker's story by Murnau's screenwriter Henrik Galeen. In the original, estate agent Herr Knock receives correspondence from the undying Count Orlok in mysterious symbols; here it's beyond question that this is an occult conspiracy.

The extent of Orlok's powers – the baleful influence of his shadow – is expounded more clearly. And the heroine's final sacrifice is far more explicit, in every sense. It's a textbook example of how to open out a pre-existing text.

Just as productively, Eggers probes the subtext, reaching into the blackened, blood-choked heart of vampire folklore. Here, the relationship between Ellen Hutter (Lily-Rose Depp) and the undead Count Orlok (Bill Skarsgård) is more complex than simply victim/victimiser, a bond knotted together at the very nexus of sex and death. The highly strung Ellen has a deathwish longing for Orlok, a thirst which demands satiation. And the strange fits which see her writhing body twisted in contortions recall nothing so much as orgasmic release.

It's a ravishingly dark film, both thematically and visually, which has clearly had a great deal of love and attention poured into it. You may find it hard to credit that 1838 Wisborg (home to the Hutters) is a set, as production designer Craig Lathrop's recreations of period Germany are so impressive.

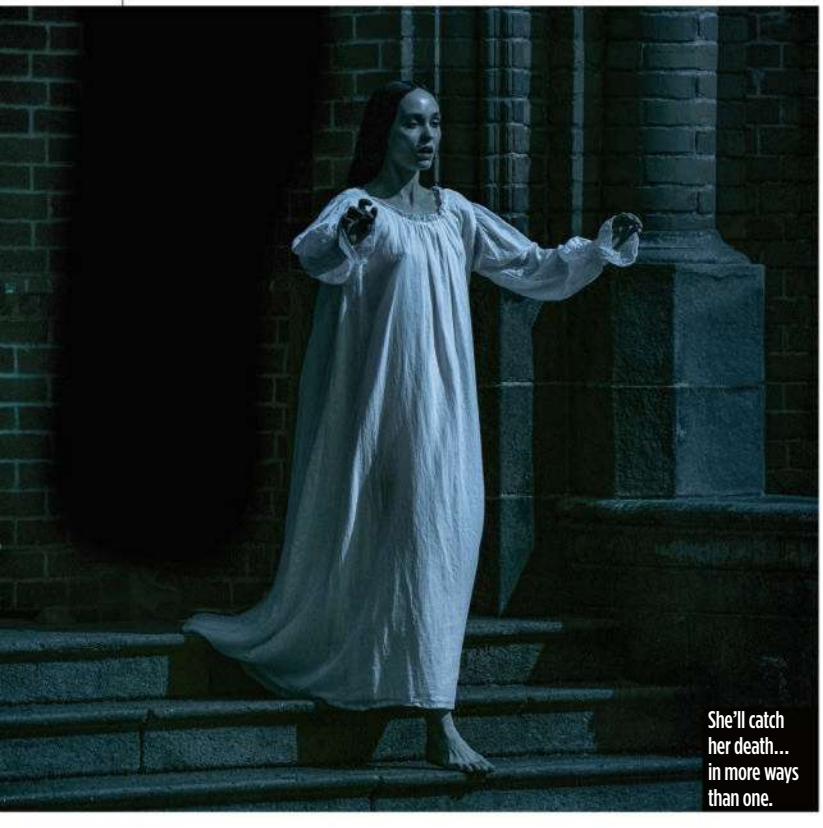
The sound design is equally stunning. This really is a film to submerge yourself into in a cinema, so you can be buffeted by every horse's footfall, every furious downpour, every creak of a board.

So much hinges on the depiction of the Count. Murnau's bat-eared creep might provoke sniggers today. Bill Skarsgård is unrecognisable beneath the prosthetics as Egger's reimagined Orlok, who with his sub-bass rumble vocals, pustulent flesh and aristocratic moustache (a nod, maybe, to Stoker's original description of Dracula?) exudes both magnetism and menace.

> **"It's a film with its own distinct identity"**

And Eggers finds new ways to induce a shiver: this Orlok is a sexual threat not only to Ellen, but (during early scenes at his castle) to Hoult's lawyer too; as the Transylvanian hovers, you can practically hear Hutter's skin crawling.

It's a film which should send thousands scurrying to streamers to explore a classic of German Expressionism. We imagine that'll make the director, himself in the Count's thrall since the age of nine, very satisfied. **Ian Berriman**



She'll catch her death... in more ways than one.

i At high school, Robert Eggers co-directed a stage production of *Nosferatu*, featuring black and white make-up and costumes.

THE DAMNED

★★★½☆

RELEASED 10 JANUARY

TBC | 89 minutes

Director **Thordur Palsson**

Cast **Odessa Young, Joe Cole, Turlough Convery, Rory McCann**

Paranoia and creeping dread have been close-quarters companions in many tales of terror in a cold climate before now. Though writer/director Thordur Palsson's debut feature brings little that's fresh to this feverish genre cabin, he does stir up his mix of morality tale and revenant fable with elemental style.

It's survival of the cruellest at a 19th century Icelandic fishing station, whose owner Eva (Odessa Young) faces a choice. Caught on harbour rocks, a sinking ship is spied. Should her already beleaguered fishermen let its sailors drown, or risk their own weathered skins to help? Choosing the former, Eva and her team are haunted by guilt – and perhaps something worse.

Invoking folk tales of vengeful corpses, the director anchors supernatural intimations in character and landscape. While Young's persuasively harrowed lead takes much of the dramatic strain, the director's wide shots and harsh close-ups evoke isolation and claustrophobia with equal intensity.

Jarring cuts and flashes of violence amplify the nerve's-edge atmosphere, though it's frustrating that Palsson rarely lands the frights. His chiller works best as a study in suspense and ambiguity, with its moodiness maximised by a dense, whispery score from *Evil Dead Rise* composer Stephen McKeon. **Kevin Harley**

MOANA 2

Fantasy Island

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
PG | 100 minutes
Directors **David G Derrick Jr, Jason Hand, Dana Ledoux Miller**
Cast **Auli'i Cravalho, Dwayne Johnson, Rose Matafeo, Hualalai Chung**

It's been eight years since Moana (Auli'i Cravalho) bumped into the mischievous demigod Maui (Dwayne Johnson) while exploring the seas. In 2020, a Disney+ sequel series was announced. In February 2024, that became a movie.

The act of squeezing an entire series into one film may explain why *Moana 2* is stuffed to the gills with so much story at the expense of the thing we really want: jokes. Maui only lands a couple of dazzling one-liners here – a pittance compared to the first film's hit-rate.

If it's pure adventure you're after, though, you're in luck. After an overlong, exposition-filled opening act, Moana sets off to find a legendary island which can reunite the peoples of the Pacific. This involves rescuing Maui from his latest escapade (never fully explained), escaping the bowels of a giant clam, battling sea monsters and breaking a curse.

It all looks bloody gorgeous, with water effects that would make the Disney animators of the 20th century drool. But the songs, while pretty, don't stick in your head after first viewing. Maui isn't given that much to do until the finale. And the film ends with too many plot strands left untied. If there's a *Moana 3*, let's hope it isn't as dense as this one. **Jayne Nelson**

ℹ In Spain, France and Portugal the title is *Vaiana 2*, as a perfume company has a trademarked brand called Moana Bouquet.

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE WAR OF THE ROHIRRIM

(Helm's) Deep Cut

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
12A | 134 minutes
Director **Kenji Kamiyama**
Cast **Brian Cox, Gaia Wise, Luke Pasqualino, Miranda Otto**

Should *The Rings Of Power* not quite be fulfilling your need for more JRR Tolkien adaptations in your life, *The War Of The Rohirrim* might be just the thing to tide you over until future film offerings arrive.

Another step back in time (to roughly 200 years before Frodo and co took possessed jewellery to a volcano), it explores the conflict that led to Helm's Deep (the mountainous fortress spotlighted in *The Two Towers*) securing its name. Spoiler alert: a courageous death is involved.

An ambitious blend of anime and Tolkien lore – taken from one of the *Rings*' appendices – its focus is the headstrong Hèra (Gaia Wise), a sword-hacked chip off the old block for ruler/dad Helm Hammerhand (Brian Cox), who bristles at the patriarchal society in which she's growing up. When a disagreement between Helm and one of the local lords turns fatal, the man's son Wulf (Luke Pasqualino) swears bloody vengeance, and recruits an army to stage a devious attack.

The visuals are predictably sweeping, the battles impressive, and Stephen Gallagher's score evokes the power of Howard Shore's work. If the storyline dips into trope once too often (how many times do childhood friends have to become foes before we put that particular narrative to the sword?), the remainder of the film makes up for that. A spirited batch of voice performances and a rich seam of references to discover (Shieldmaidens! Recognisable weaponry!) ensure this is a worthy prequel to Peter Jackson's films. **James White**

ℹ Producer Philippa Boyens has said Héra is partly inspired by Æthelflæd, the Lady of the Mercians, Alfred the Great's daughter.

"But you said I'd meet Bradley Walsh this time!"

DRINKING GAME

Knock back a beverage of your choice every time...

- A cute and cheery voice comes from a loudspeaker (take two swigs if it's singing).
- The mum character shows up her son something rotten.

- Gi-hun's frantic attempts to warn other players only make things worse.
- The guards clear away dead bodies (but don't bother mopping up the blood).
- A bad guy puts on some music to chill out.

SQUID GAME Season Two

Playing merry hell

★★★½☆

UK/US: **Netflix, streaming now**

Creator **Hwang Dong-Hyuk**

Cast **Lee Jung-jae, Lee Byung-hun, Lee Seo-hwan, Kang Ae-shim**

EPISODES 2.01-2.07 **Two years ago,** *Squid Game* became a global phenomenon. Death games had seemingly been done to death themselves by *Battle Royale*, *The Hunger Games* and a zillion more. But *Squid Game* had macabre humour, great characters, and class war satire.

This second round of carnage is less vital and startling. It's a smart sequel that respects its audience, with clever swerves, more outstanding characters and a political strand that's breathtakingly topical.

But it's compromised by dragged-out B-plots and the curse of otherwise good Netflix shows, a viewer-baiting non-ending. It starts with the show's hero, Gi-hun, using his winnings to track down the makers of the death games, enlisting gangsters and also Jun-Ho, the cop who previously infiltrated the games in search of his brother. You didn't think that cliff fall finished him off, did you?

There's a lot of set-up before the main games, though it's enlivened tremendously by the return of the world's most hateful salesman, played by Gong Yoo from *Train To Busan*. He still taunts the destitute with demonic glee, stomping on pastries in front of homeless people in a park, like a member of the Bullingdon Club.

> **"A political strand that's breathtakingly topical"**

Inevitably, Gi-hun's soon back in the game, in the familiar complex with Escher stairways and CBeebies decor. New players include a psycho rapper who's stepped straight from a comic; a shy trans woman who transforms vividly; a pregnant girl and her worthless-seeming ex; and another loser kid, shocked that his indomitable elderly mum is playing too. As in season one, the oldster steals the show.

If you've seen the trailer, you'll know that the horrid giant girl doll with the revolving head is back, still calling "Red Light! Green Light!" in her treacly voice.

The other games are new, including a multi-part challenge that veers deliciously from wacky high jinks to sudden death. But the most cutting part of the show is the way it depicts democracy. All the gamers hear Gi-hun's frantic warnings about the horrors that await them if they keep playing, and have the evidence of their own eyes.

All it would take is one majority vote for the players to quit and the nightmare to end. In short, everyone knows the consequences... but they still vote for the madness anyway. Expect a dozen think-pieces on the parallels between *Squid Game* and Trump's second election victory.

It's a shame that Jun-ho and other characters are wasted in slack B-stories, still spinning their wheels when the show reaches its cliffhanger. That finale's full of bullets and mayhem, but it cops out, stringing us along into the forthcoming third season, reportedly the "real" conclusion.

It's how franchises work, but like the death game players, you really deserve to know what you're being roped into.

Andrew Osmond

i Contentious casting: the trans woman is a great character, but she's played by a non-trans male actor, Park Sung-hoon.

DREAM PRODUCTIONS

Zzzzzz-rated movies

★★★★½

UK/US: **Disney+, streaming now**

- Showrunner **Mike Jones**
- Cast **Paula Pell, Richard Ayoade, Kensington Tallman, Ally Maki**

EPISODES 1.01-1.04 **While the *Inside Out*** movies reveal what's going on inside young Riley's head during her waking hours, this crazily inventive four-episode spin-off delves into her dream world.

Every night a team of mini-movie makers create subconscious epics that help the youngster make sense of what's going on in her real life. But Paula, the director who's been guiding her dreams since she was a nipper, with sparkly, rainbow-hued feel-good flicks, may not be equipped to deal with the internalised horrors of a teenage mind. And there's a edgy, ambitious daydream director who's eager for promotion...

Set in-between the two movies and featuring cameos from the films' emotion characters, *Dream Productions* is a worthy small-screen counterpart. It extends the franchise's world into new areas while maintaining the wit, heart and cross-generational appeal.

Sophisticated gags about REM, melatonin, caffeine and the subconscious rub shoulders with Justin Beaver puns, Rainbow Unicorns and slapstick mayhem.

The CG animation is massively impressive for a small-screen project, bringing to life design work that is overflowing with fun details. At times the series is almost too overstuffed with things begging for your attention and loses focus, but mostly it comes together like a dream. **Dave Golder**

i Taciturn, grumpy, enigmatic dream-maker Fink reads the same newspaper as Anger does in the movies: *The Mind Reader*.

Dreams can come true! (They can't really).

THE RIG Series Two

Raiders Of The Lost Arctic

★★☆☆☆

UK/US **Prime Video, streaming from 2 January**

- Showrunner **David Macpherson**
- Cast **Emily Hampshire, Iain Glen, Alice Krige, Martin Compston**

EPISODES 2.01-2.06 **Did somebody** say, "We're gonna need a bigger rig"? After all, series one of Amazon's sci-fi thriller set on a North Sea oil rig ended with an ancient energy creature causing a tsunami that destroyed the rig (along with large parts of the UK coastline).

So for series two the former crew of the Kinloch Bravo find themselves on a new high-tech rig that looks suspiciously like something that'll need rescuing by Thunderbird 2.

Welcome to the Stac, situated deep in the ice floes of the Arctic Circle. It has a platform that moves up and down its steel legs, and can even go for (very slow) strolls. Having been rescued by Pictor, the dodgy company who owned their rig, the Bravo crew are deposited at the Stac and told they're stuck there unless they sign an NDA forbidding them from revealing the existence of the ancient entity, aka the ancestor.

Most of them don't; instead they remain in the Arctic and try to find ways to communicate with the being, to make friends and ask it not to cause another tsunami. But Pictor may have other ideas...

After the drearily claustrophobic first series, things do at least open up here, with seabed expeditions in rovers, car chases on the ice and a B-plot on the mainland involving displaced flood refugees and Pictor's internal power struggles.

> **"Despite the broader canvas it remains a plodding affair"**

But despite the broader canvas *The Rig* remains a plodding, talky, derivative affair, with low-rent action scenes, familiar plot beats, thin characters that are a waste of good acting talent, and a really corny climax. It doesn't help that the Arctic exteriors are mostly (understandably enough) digitally enhanced studio creations, giving the whole series a weird dreamlike artificiality.

The Stac's kinda fun, sure, but in most other ways bigger hasn't resulted in better. **Dave Golder**

i Series two's corporate conspiracy plot was inspired by Ripley facing off against Weyland-Yutani in *Aliens*.

"We'll need to rig harder than we've ever rugged."

SELLING SUPERMAN

★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

Director **Adam Schomer**

EPISODES 1.01-1.04 **"I massively** resent this documentary and the attention it's bringing," says Darren Watts, subject of this four-part series. Told with wit and empathy, it proves a fascinating insight into not just the world of high-end comic book collecting but the collateral damage of an obsessive hobby.

Watts's father Dale was a reclusive, emotionally neglectful figure who secretly accrued an astonishing hoard of comics, some 300,000 back issues whose true monetary worth was only discovered on his death. The glimpses we get of iconic covers are authentically mouth-watering: *Batman* 1, *Fantastic Four* 1, the first appearance of Spider-Man and, most coveted of all, *Superman* 1, valued at over $3.5 million.

Yes, there's an irresistible gawp factor in seeing such beauties, now slabbed in plastic and housed in a temperature-controlled fortress that calls to mind the warehouse in *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*. But director Adam Schomer explores the emotional legacy as much as the physical one. This is already a fractured, troubled family, and now they're compelled to deal with the blaze of media attention and the insults of internet trolls.

Conflicted to the end, Watts emerges as likeable and principled, still dealing with the ghost of his father, in the caped shadow of a perfect hero. **Nick Setchfield**

Juliette, not at all bothered about finding a Romeo.

SILO Season Two

Subterranean Homesick Blues

★★★½☆

UK/US **Apple TV+, streaming now**

Showrunner **Graham Yost**

Cast **Rebecca Ferguson, Common, Tim Robbins, Harriet Walter**

EPISODES 2.01-2.10 **Following up the** excellent first season of Apple's dystopian SF mystery box series was always going to be a tall order, but season two also has a huge structural issue to struggle with: the action is now divided between two silos.

Having been ejected from Silo 18, former sheriff Juliette Nichols (Rebecca Ferguson) unexpectedly survives and makes her way to the abandoned Silo 17, where more mysteries await – not the least of which is why the doorway is surrounded by thousands of dead bodies.

Meanwhile back at Silo 18, Juliette's death-dodging trek is inspiring a grass roots rebellion.

"The Silo 17 action rapidly becomes dreary and repetitive"

After an impressive opening episode, which concentrates exclusively on her journey into the unknown, the Silo 17 action rapidly becomes dreary and repetitive. It feels like an exercise in extreme padding, designed to stop Juliette from returning to Silo 18 – with a few scraps of pertinent new information – before everything that needs to happen there has happened.

Even more annoyingly, Ferguson – so good in season one – has only one irritating "I'm crazy me!" character to interact with for most of the season, before things take an even worse turn when a tribe of "lost boys" teens turn up.

Luckily all the politicking and backstabbing back at Silo 18 remains much more interesting; there are plenty of shocks, twists and outstanding performances, with some minor characters from last season becoming more central. The production design, effects and world-building are as strong as ever, and the last moments of the finale are nail-biting. **Dave Golder**

i The original plan for season two was to alternate between episodes set in Silo 17 and episodes set in Silo 18.

A GHOST STORY FOR CHRISTMAS: WOMAN OF STONE

★★★★☆

UK **BBC Two/streaming now on iPlayer**

Writer/director **Mark Gatiss**

Cast **Celia Imrie, Monica Dolan, Éanna Hardwicke, Phoebe Horn**

Mark Gatiss had some work to do with his latest festive chiller. Its source, E Nesbit's 1887 story "Man-Size In Marble", is a slight affair: an account of events one All Saints' Eve, when a village legend comes true and a church's recumbent effigies of two knights rise up and walk to the site of their former home – a cottage belonging to some recently installed newlyweds.

In adapting it, Gatiss has taken a few liberties. A framing device in which the bed-ridden Nesbit (Celia Imrie) recounts the tale feels a tad extraneous, though it's charming enough.

He also injects a throughline of "toxic masculinity", which seems more like the imposition of a popular theme du jour than the teasing out of anything inherent to Nesbit's story.

Still, this provides added depth and an interesting new twist, in which an abusive character gets their comeuppance, but the punishment so exceeds the crime that you'd have to be made of stone yourself not to feel some degree of sympathy.

It's a shame we don't get a good look at the marble knights in motion – they're only briefly glimpsed from behind. But then with the pennies of a BBC Two budget it was probably best to leave that to the viewer's imagination. **Ian Berriman**

WICKED

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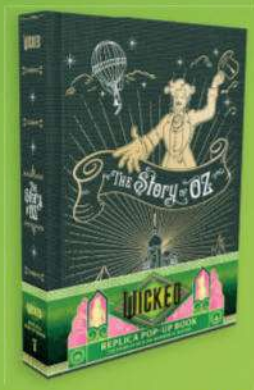

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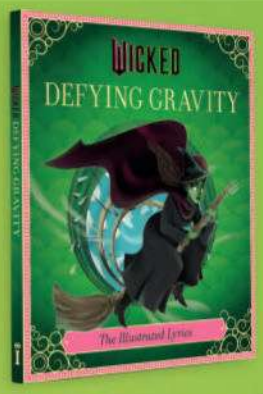

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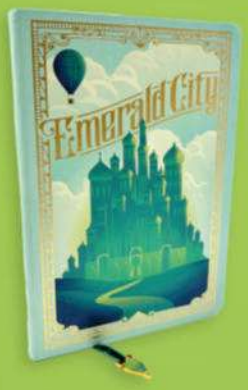

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JEAN ROLLIN

The Runaways

RELEASED OUT NOW!
1972/1981 | 18 | Blu-ray
Cast **Marie-Pierre Castel, Mireille Dargent, Laurence Dubas, Christiane Coppé**

These impressive new restorations showcase two films that share a certain sisterhood in the Rollin canon.

Requiem For A Vampire ★★★☆☆ finds two fugitive, gun-toting girls encountering the undead in rural France. Clashing the gothic with the groovy, it's an atmospheric but rather shapeless affair, an almost dialogue-free, backstory-bereft fairy tale that seems to run on pure dream logic. Or maybe wet dream logic, given the industrial amounts of nudity involved. Exploitation elements aside, it offers some intriguing twists on vampire lore, and for all its slack pacing it's a heady, entertaining watch, with some striking imagery.

A decade on, **The Escapees** ★★★½☆ follows another pair of female runaways, though these two are portrayed with infinitely greater depth in a more mature movie. Eschewing the blatantly supernatural – Rollin argued that a single moment qualified it as a fantasy – it's in many ways an atypical entry in the French filmmaker's canon, despite thematic similarities to 1980's *The Night Of The Hunted*.

But its bruisedly romantic exploration of people in the dreamlike margins of society, not to mention its blood, flesh and surrealism, more than qualify it as a companion piece to his more straightforward horrors.

Extras It may be short on words, but *Requiem For A Vampire* comes with a choice of English and French language versions. An enjoyable new retrospective featuring friends and collaborators unearths tales of bat attacks and brushes with Interpol (40 minutes). Elsewhere critic Virginie Sélavy offers analysis (seven minutes), and film historians Troy Howarth and Nathaniel Thompson contribute a new commentary.

The late Rollin provides archival commentary on select scenes, as well as a video introduction (five minutes) and a personal reflection that reveals the influence of the silent serials he enjoyed as a kid (eight minutes). He also discusses his later career as a novelist (nine minutes).

There are archival interviews with cast members Louise Dhour (eight minutes) and Paul Bisciglia (three minutes) too. You also get trailers, and gratuitously fully clothed alternate takes for some of the nude sequences (three minutes).

> "Two films that share a certain sisterhood"

The Escapees is a little lighter on extras. Critic Tim Lucas provides a commentary. Also new are an in-depth analysis by author Stephen Thrower (35 minutes), a celebration of Rollin fave Louise Dhour (five minutes), and a previously unseen interview with actor Jean-Loup Phillipe (nine minutes).

In an interview from 2008, a pleasingly candid Rollin discusses his evolving relationship with the film (29 minutes). There's also a chance to watch alternate cut *Les Paumées Du Petit Matin*, complete with an extra seagull shot for all you ornithological completists.

Both films come with galleries and 80-page booklets. **Nick Setchfield**

David Tennant decides to really embrace middle age.

i The North American release of *Requiem For A Vampire* gave it the altogether more lurid title of *Caged Virgins*.

THREE WISHES FOR CINDERELLA

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
1973 | PG | Blu-ray
Director **Václav Vorlíček**
Cast **Libuše Šafránková, Pavel Trávníček, Carola Braunbock, Rolf Hoppe**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **This** Czechoslovak/East German production makes for a spirited take on the familiar fairy tale. Libuše Šafránková may be remarkably winsome in the title role but she's no simpering victim, proving more than a match for her mean-hearted family, let alone a besotted prince. The enchanted nuts that grant her wishes indulge a resourceful, mischievous heroine with just a touch of wood sprite about her.

Some attractively shot snowy landscapes give the film a distinct breath of winter, while the storytelling stays reasonably grounded throughout. There's none of the panto grotesquerie or dreamlike fantasy found in other versions, and the special effects are equally modest. Low-key magic, then, but this feelgood folk tale is magical just the same.

Extras New to Second Run's HD edition are an altogether more eerie silent Czech version of *Cinderella* from 1929, with a foot-torturing mean streak (47 minutes), and 1937's "The Little Shoe", a charming animated curio that's actually a cunning commercial for a Prague shoe shop (five minutes). Film historian Michael Brooke presents a revised version of the informative appreciation that accompanied the DVD (37 minutes). Plus: trailers; a 16-page booklet. **Nick Setchfield**

DEMOLITION MAN

Cryos And Misdemeanours

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★★½

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

1993 | 15 | Blu-ray

Director **Marco Brambilla**

Cast **Sylvester Stallone, Wesley Snipes, Sandra Bullock, Nigel Hawthorne**

In the (then-)future of 1996, violent LA cop John Spartan (Sylvester Stallone) and even more violent criminal Simon Phoenix (Wesley Snipes) are cryogenically frozen as punishment for their misdemeanours. Thirty-six years later a reawakened Phoenix runs amok in the peaceful utopia of San Angeles, so the police draft the "neanderthal" Spartan to bring his old nemesis to justice.

In the finest tradition of high-concept '90s actioners, that's everything you need to know about the plot. *Demolition Man* is also a hell of a lot of fun, as Stallone's trademark action man heroics meet their match in a comedically clean-cut vision of the future – a place where alcohol, sex and swearing are illegal, and loo paper has been replaced by a trio of mysterious seashells.

The fish-out-of-water gags and satire don't quite sustain the 115-minute running time – and a subplot about a revolutionary played by Denis Leary feels tacked on – but *Demolition Man* is never less than entertaining.

Extras This Arrow Video edition is impressively comprehensive. Two new commentaries are the highlight. The first gives director Marco Brambilla and co-writer Daniel Waters the chance to reminisce three decades on; the duo are engaging and candid about the blockbuster they "made into a silly movie" – and no, they don't know how the seashells work either.

"Gis your dinner money or I'll deck you."

The second sees Mike White from the *Projection Booth* podcast putting the film in historical context, while admitting that – thanks to the large number of writers – there may be a few "apocryphal" stories. You also get an archival track by Brambilla and producer Joel Silver. Also new are a visual essay about Stallone (17 minutes) and interviews with the production designer (14 minutes), stunt coordinator (six minutes), special make-up effects designer (six minutes) and body effects set coordinator (10 minutes).

Plus: the option to switch between versions with different product placement; gallery; trailer; 60-page booklet; poster; six art cards; two stickers. **Richard Edwards**

i The name of Bullock's character, Lenina Huxley, was inspired by Lenina Crowne in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*.

DAWN OF THE MUMMY

A Pharaoh Tale Of New Yorkers

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

1981 | 15 | Blu-ray

Director **Frank Agrama**

Cast **Brenda King, Barry Sattels, George Peck, John Salvo**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **The similarity of** the title to *Dawn Of The Dead* can be no coincidence, as zombie flicks were a model for this "Section Three" nasty (never prosecuted for obscenity, but liable to seizure) in which mummies emerge from the sand much as the undead usually rise up from graveyards.

A photographer and four models fly to Egypt from NYC, then stumble on thieves pinching gold from a tomb. The heat from their lights revives a pharaoh, who's soon joined by his undead underlings to wreak havoc.

> **"The stupidity of everyone guarantees entertainment"**

The locations impress, and although why his remains start oozing Fairy Liquid is unclear, the glistening mummy is a creepy creation. Some of the acting is atrocious, and the gore effects are basic (clearly the local butcher's shop did good business), but the stupidity of everyone involved guarantees entertainment.

Nothing – not being shot at, finding a decapitated head or having their horses eaten – prompts the Yanks to skedaddle, or dissuades them from swimming alone in an oasis at dead of night.

Extras Treasured Films' 2K restoration has five new bonuses. DoP Sergio Rubini (26 minutes) reveals that producer Frank Agrama (who took over after firing the director) was "clueless". Though billed as a history of mummy cinema, Stephen Thrower's talking head (34 minutes) is more selective, with the focus on obscure oddities. A second talking head rattles off a list of '80s titles (16 minutes).

"You should see me when I've got a cold. Ha!"

A biography of Agrama (15 minutes) wraps up by claiming that he "can't be contained in one essay". Maybe try harder? Writers Kim Newman and Barry Forshaw provide amused commentary.

An archival yak track sees the late Agrama implying that he sacked the original director due to diarrhoea... What a gent. Plus: trailer; gallery; booklet; six art cards. **Ian Berriman**

i According to Rubini, the pond used in the oasis bathing scene was full of stagnant water, and smelled "beyond revolting".

GET AWAY

Holiday From Hell

★★★★☆

RELEASED 10 JANUARY

2025 | 18 | SVOD

Director **Steffen Haarsy**

Cast **Nick Frost, Aisling Bea, Maisie Ayres, Sebastian Croft**

SKY CINEMA **In Nick Frost's first** movie as sole writer he returns to the horror-comedy waters he last swam in for *Shaun Of The Dead*. But here the filmic references aren't George Romero or John Carpenter, but Robin Hardy and Ari Aster, albeit by way of Ben Wheatley and Mike Leigh.

To lay out too much plot would spoil some tasty twists, but let's just say that its premise finds a British family of four holidaying on the remote – and fictional, before you start looking for it on a map – Swedish island of Svälta.

Get Away makes the most of its culture clash comedy, and there are some pleasingly meta moments. "I've got no phone signal, Sam," teenage daughter Jessie says. "Of course you haven't, we've come on holiday to a Swedish horror film," replies her brother.

But it's all building to a devastatingly bloody climax. Our lips are sealed as to what happens in the movie's final reel, but it's a tonal shift that Frost and director Steffen Haars steer with deftness.

Get Away is that rarest of beasts – a folk horror that does something excitingly new with the genre. **Steve O'Brien**

> **Makes the most of its culture clash comedy**

ℹ Nick Frost also worked with Steffen Haars on Dutch horror-comedy *Krazy House*, released in the Netherlands in May.

"We've won Most Smug Family 2024? How lovely!"

WEREWOLVES

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ☆☆☆☆☆

RELEASED 13 JANUARY

2024 | 15 | DVD/download

What do you do if a loved one turns into a werewolf? With zombies, as a culture, we've decided that we have to kill them. Werewolves, though? They're gonna turn back into humans after the full moon. So what's your strategy?

The emotional and philosophical bits of this splattery survival horror are far more interesting than the rest of it, so it's a shame the running-and-screaming bits take up so much of the runtime. A more original story could've done the premise better justice.

Extras None. **Sarah Dobbs**

BEEZEL

★★☆☆☆ EXTRAS ★★☆☆☆

RELEASED 6 JANUARY

2024 | 18 | Blu-ray/DVD/download

A father films his son being eaten alive. A camera operator walks into a trap. And then a couple inherits a murder house, and spends so long figuring out how to sell it that they put themselves in danger.

This supernatural cheapie can't quite seem to decide on the story it's telling, the decade it wants to be set in, or even the medium it's using, so it tries to do everything and ends up not doing much. The creature effects are cool, but the lack of coherent logic is frustrating.

Extras Making Of; two shorts by the same director. **Sarah Dobbs**

THE GHOST WRITER

★★☆☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2023 | 15 | Download

A blocked whodunit writer travels to the remote cottage of his late father, an acclaimed author, and finds himself the central protagonist in a mystery involving ghosts, number-one fans, plagiarism, blackmail, murder and fictive characters made flesh.

Location and lensing are strikingly bleak, but for all the twists and turns in British director Paul Wilkins's horror-tinged thriller, it remains curiously uninvolving, with little to say about either father-son relationships or the creative process. **Jamie Graham**

ELEVATION

★★½☆☆

RELEASED 28 JANUARY

2024 | TBC | SVOD

PRIME VIDEO **"From the** producers of *A Quiet Place*" says the poster, but the comparison does this alien invasion drama few favours.

Its lethal "Reapers" hunt by detecting carbon dioxide, and can't set foot above 8,000 feet. But with time running out for Anthony Mackie's sick son, the concerned dad heads below "the Line" to find crucial supplies for him.

There are a few tense moments, but it's devoid of humour and you can spot most of the twists a mile off. **Richard Edwards**

THE SECRET OF NIMH

House of Mouse to mouse house

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

1982 | U | Blu-ray

Director **Don Bluth**

Cast **Elizabeth Hartman, Dom DeLuise, Derek Jacobi, Paul Shenar**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **After Walt Disney's** death in 1966, animator Don Bluth saw quality in his Disney workplace fall off a cliff, with beauty and creativity sacrificed to save money. Annoyed, he quit to set up his own animation company. This film was its first offering, and a jolly good debut it is, too.

Adapted from Robert C O'Brien's 1971 children's book *Mrs Frisby And The Rats Of NIMH*, it's the story of a mouse named Mrs Brisby (her name was changed here to avoid baiting the owners of the Frisbee). When her son falls sick, she must ask a peculiar colony of rats to help move her house before it ends up under a plough. The rats' secret? They have super-intelligence after escaping from a human laboratory.

Elizabeth Hartman provides breathless, sugar-sweet vocals as Mrs Brisby, Dom DeLuise entertains as a daft crow, and Derek Jacobi brings Shakespearean gravitas to elderly rat Nicodemus (although he's hard to hear at times, overdoing his dramatic whispers). Undeniably beautiful, with moments of unexpected horror, the film showcases Bluth's eye for the creativity Disney had left behind

> **"Beautiful, with moments of unexpected horror"**

"What is the secret of NIMH? No idea, mate."

– although his new studio didn't completely hit its stride until *An American Tail* four years later.

Extras Part of Eureka's Masters Of Cinema range, this release has two commentaries: a recycled one from Bluth and producer Gary Goldman, plus a newbie from animation scholar Sam Summers, who's worth his salt.

Also new are an interview with Bluth (20 minutes), and an appreciation by animation expert Stacey Abbott (23 minutes). A video essay about the story's approach to motherhood (16 minutes) is illuminating. Finally, an old behind-the-scenes featurette (14 minutes) is good fun. Plus: booklet.

Jayne Nelson

i *Next Gen*'s Wil Wheaton makes his movie debut voicing Mrs Frisby's son, Martin. A young Shannen Doherty voices his sister.

CREEP

Caught By The Fuzz

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

2014 | 15 | Blu-ray

Director **Patrick Brice**

Cast **Patrick Brice, Mark Duplass, Katie Aselton**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Patrick Brice and** Mark Duplass thought they were making a quirky relationship drama when they started filming *Creep*. Retreating to Duplass's rural holiday cabin, the pair partially improvised a series of awkward encounters between young filmmaker Aaron (Brice) and his client Josef (Duplass), an apparently dying man who wants to record a video diary for his unborn son, but who is also the absolute definition of Too Much.

The dangerous energy in Duplass's OTT niceness soon became too hard to ignore, however, leading to a latter-day found footage classic. *Creep* has aged well. Its slow-burn pace, tricksy structure and occasional well-deployed jumps always keep you on your toes, while Duplass's performance is unsettling.

Sure, Josef has an axe and a creepy wolf mask nicknamed Peachfuzz, but there's a real vulnerability there too. He's clearly a deeply lonely man, and Aaron's empathy towards him makes *some* sense of why he keeps putting himself in harm's way, all the way to the film's memorably disturbing climax.

Extras This Second Sight edition comes with two commentaries: one is an archive track with Brice and Duplass; the other a newly recorded one featuring Brice, Duplass and editor Chistopher Donlon.

All three are the subject of substantial individual interviews about their experiences with the film and its sequel (73 minutes combined), and all are involved with "10 Years of *Creep*" (31 minutes) – an interesting live Q&A about the unlikely creation of the film and its continued impact.

"There's no business like show business..."

A wisely omitted deleted scene (two minutes) offers an alternative beginning to the film, but rather kills some of the mystery. There's also an alternative version of one of Josef's messages to Aaron (two minutes) and two alternative endings (seven minutes). One of these is largely similar to the real ending, but the other moves things in a different – and far less sinister – direction. The Limited Edition set comes with a 70-page booklet and six art cards. **Will Salmon**

i The "You have an axe?" scene was improvised long before the filmmakers knew the tool would play a role in the film.

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RAMPO NOIR

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED 6 JANUARY
2005 | 18 | Blu-ray
Directors **Akio Jissôji, Atsushi Kaneko, Hisayasu Satô, Suguru Takeuchi**
Cast **Tadanobu Asano, Hiroki Narimiya, Ryûhei Matsuda**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Not for the** faint-hearted, this anthology adapts four tales by Japanese writer Edogawa Rampo, whose weird fiction dealt in sexual perversion and the grotesque.

All four directors bring different styles. "Mars's Canal" – an eerie vignette of gender confusion – feels like an experimental short. "Mirror Hell" – a tale of hand-mirrors which melt faces – has more Dutch angles than Adam West's *Batman*, and a slickly surrealist mise-en-scène, crowded with reflective surfaces.

That story entails bondage; "Caterpillar" goes further, as a limbless war vet is reduced to a sex object by his sadist wife. But manga artist Atsushi Kaneko's "Crawling Bugs" is the stand-out. A portrait of madness set to loops of washing machine churn, its visions of a romantic idyll existing only in the necrophile protagonist's mind mean it concludes with a campy efflorescence.

Extras Nothing on Rampo, but Jasper Sharp and Alexander Zahlten helpfully compare each section to the source material in their commentary. There are six new interviews (108 minutes): three directors, two DoPs, and an actor. Feature-length Making Of *Crossing The Lens* (2006, 76 minutes) gets a tad pretentious (interviewees are asked "What is a film?"). Plus: premiere footage; gallery; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

FROM BEYOND

In The Realm Of The Senses

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
1986 | 18 | 4K/Blu-ray
Director **Stuart Gordon**
Cast **Jeffrey Combs, Barbara Crampton, Ken Foree, Ted Sorel**

Using HP Lovecraft's 1920 short story of the same name as its starting point, Stuart Gordon's follow-up to *Re-Animator* reunited that film's stars Jeffrey Combs and Barbara Crampton. Gloriously garish, it's a transgressive treat.

Gleefully full-on from second one, it centres on the Resonator, a device whose vibrations stimulate the pineal gland, allowing those under its influence to perceive another dimension – and the flying, eel-like creatures which surround us all the time. But it also makes something *much worse* aware of humanity...

The Resonator doesn't only weaken the barrier between worlds, though; it dismantles taboos, inducing a sensory hunger of all kinds. There's a *Videodrome* level of kink here, with Crampton's buttoned-up shrink transforming into a leather-clad dominatrix. The film features some wonderfully gruesome, gooey practical effects. The odd appliance hasn't aged well – when Combs sprouts a phallic pineal antennae, it's clear his forehead has been built up. But a delightful supporting turn from Ken Foree as laidback detective Bubba Brownlee more than compensates.

Extras 88 Films bring us substantial new interviews with Combs (31 minutes), Crampton (36 minutes), Foree (31 minutes) and producer Brian Yuzna (33 minutes); these supply decent anecdotes about the freezing cold sound stages at Empire Pictures' Rome home, and eating Poligrip from rubber brains.

A conversational commentary teams critics Kim Newman and Sean Hogan – at a ratio of about 10:1. Stick with the archival yack track, which teams Gordon, Yuzna, Crampton and Combs.

Also carried over from the 2007 DVD are an interview with Gordon (nine minutes) and a short piece on restoring some MPAA-mandated trims. Plus: storyboards; trailer; gallery; poster; four art cards. **Ian Berriman**

i Ted Sorel, who played the Resonator's creator Dr Pretorius, was the nephew of Universal make-up artist Jack Pierce.

THE LAST VIDEO STORE

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
2023 | 15 | Blu-ray
Directors **Cody Kennedy, Tim Rutherford**
Cast **Kevin Martin, Yaayaa Adams, Matthew Kennedy, Josh Lenner**

The glory days of VHS are celebrated in this nostalgic paean to direct-to-video B-movies and indie rental stores, awash with lurid green and purple; its makers clearly dig the Spectrevision stable.

Kevin Martin (owner of real-life Canadian store The Lobby) is Blaster Video's sole employee. A dead customer's daughter (Yaayaa Adams) returns his tapes, plus a cursed VHS which can pull characters from video into reality. Cue encounters with an alien bug, a masked psycho, and a vest-wearing action hero.

That's your lot plot-wise, so it feels like a short that's metastasized. And Adams is given little to do beyond display boggle-eyed disbelief. But there are some well-observed gags, and the film makes a good case for the value of curatorship.

Extras A pair of writers for *Bloody Disgusting* provide commentary. One video essay (14 minutes) suffers from a phenomenon blighting the medium: recounting events that you've just watched. A second (13 minutes) is less pointless. Four shorts (22 minutes, all told), all shot in Martin's shop The Lobby, feel like dry runs.

Plus: behind-the-scenes footage (13 minutes); clips of an earlier attempt to make the film (five minutes); some crude pre-viz; trailer; gallery; booklet; poster. **Ian Berriman**

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Reviews

ACTION COMICS
DC SUPERMAN
FEB. NO. 397
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LOIS IS MARRIED... JIMMY'S A BIG WHEEL... ALL MY FRIENDS, GONE!
THE WORLD DOESN'T NEED ME ANYMORE!
WHY? WHAT W
"THE SECRET OF T
WHEEL-CHA
SUPERMAN
Cover art for Action Comics #397.
A colour key for Super Friends' last series.
SUPERMAN'S CHRISTMAS ADVENTURE IN SONG AND STORY
DECCA
A 1941 Decca Records story.
Kellogg's CORN FLAKES
EXCLUSIVE OFFER!
SUPERMAN
KRYPTON ROCKET and PUMP LAUNCHER
Regular $1.00 Value both for only 50¢
get 2 EXTRA ROCKETS 25¢
Zooms 100 feet high!
NEW FUN FOR SPACE FANS!
A Corn Flakes box from 1956.
FEB. 15, 1965
Otto O. Binder
Editorial Studio
467 Voorhees St.
Englewood, N. J.
A Man Of Steel Genesis machine concept.
Kellogg's PEP
WHOLE WHEAT FLAKES
A retail standee for cereal Pep (1947).
Otter Binder's script for Action Comics #326.

SUPERMAN: THE DEFINITIVE HISTORY

Clark Life

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

400 pages | Hardback

Authors **Edward Gross, Robert Greenberger**

Publisher **Insight Editions**

As a pop-culture icon for close to 90 years now, it's no surprise that there have been as many takes on Superman as there are pesky permutations of Kryptonite.

Encompassing everything from comics to socks to pinball machines, this lavish, outsized volume attempts to trace a red, yellow and blue throughline.

Retold in these pages, the Man of Steel's true-life origin feels almost as resonant as his fictional one: Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, two puny, picked-upon Midwestern dreamers, create the ultimate nerd power fantasy, powerful enough to spawn an entire genre.

Over the decades their brilliant, primary-coloured idea is endlessly reshaped and refracted, from wartime propaganda tool to '90s TV romcom star.

Profusely illustrated, it's a crisply written, solidly researched history, if sometimes a little brisk. The most interesting material is found in the tangents; explorations of everything from early merch to the uncanny abundance of the initials LL in Superman's life offer some genuinely fascinating angles.

Enhanced with rare archival imagery and bonus pull-out inserts, this hefty volume is a worthy addition to the shelves of your Fortress of Solitude – though at an RRP of £140, you may just need to remortgage the joint.

Nick Setchfield

i Muhammad Ali was among the names considered to play the lead in 1978's *Superman The Movie*.

THE HOUSE OF FROST AND FEATHERS

★★★☆☆

RELEASED 16 JANUARY

432 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Lauren Wiesebron**

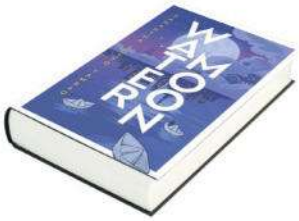
Publisher **Hodderscape**

It's possible we're all starting to get a little tired of plague tales. This debut novel has an interesting spin, though, with a sleeping illness that returns every 10 years to strike more people down. Some wake after a month, some after a year, and some – deep sleepers – never wake up at all.

Marisha is the daughter of two deep sleepers, desperate to find a way to support herself after the disappearance of her brother. A lack of options forces her to take a position as an assistant in the house of "koldunya" Baba Zima – one of the magicians and herbalists who offer what Marisha has always considered false hope to supplicants.

Despite her scepticism, Marisha becomes invested in the search for a cure to the sleeping plague, which is due to return soon, and also in the household's rivalry with Anatoli, another kolduni and former resident.

Inspired by Russian folk tales, *The House Of Frost And Feathers* is a comforting tale of found families filled with twists, turns and unexpected revelations, particularly towards the end. The climax gets a little messy, though, and the prose struggles with a final clash that leaves the reader feeling overwhelmed and confused. **Rhian Drinkwater**



WATER MOON

★★☆☆☆

RELEASED 16 JANUARY
376 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Samantha Sotto Yambao**
Publisher **Bantam**

The shadow of Studio Ghibli and Hayao Miyazaki looms large over Samantha Sotto Yambao's fantasy romance *Water Moon*.

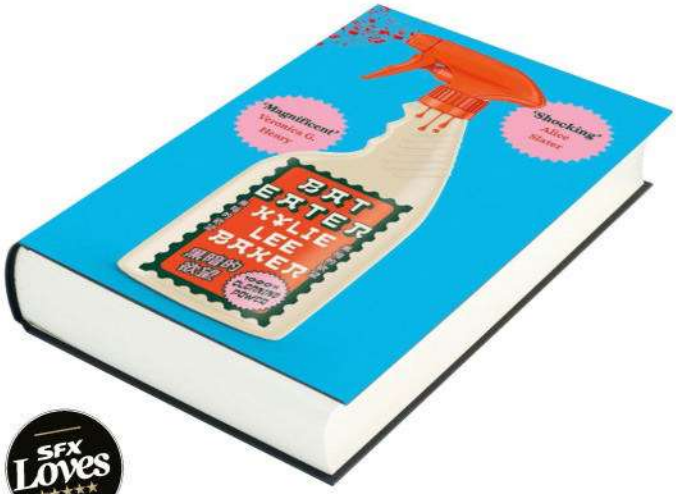
On the morning that Hana Ishikawa assumes proprietorship of her family's interdimensional pawnshop – one that collects regrets from its clients – she discovers her father has disappeared and the business is ransacked. Setting out to find her missing parent, Hana is unexpectedly joined by Keishin, a physicist who stumbled into the pawnshop by accident.

With its parallel worlds full of wonder and danger, it's easy to equate Yambao's story with Miyazaki's *Spirited Away*. The author uses Keishin as the reader's surrogate to discover Hana's enchanted homeland, where everything from markets to train stations tends towards the whimsical.

The prose is clear and descriptive, but her writing is formulaic. Yambao employs the same narrative devices in every chapter: Hana brings Keishin to a new location where he marvels at the strange sights before they are forced to flee. And the storytelling is punctuated with an endless procession of mini-cliffhangers that quickly become repetitive.

There's an abundance of ideas herein, but when everything is so ostentatiously fanciful, the overall effect is rather cloying.

David West



SFX Loves

BAT EATER

Not in the Ozzy way...

★★★★★

RELEASED 7 JANUARY
304 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Kylie Lee Baker**
Publisher **Hodder & Stoughton**

Remember how, back in early 2020, it felt like the world would never go back to normal again?

For Cora Zeng, it never does. Mid-pandemic, a racist thug pushes her half-sister Delilah in front of a train – and Cora's life falls apart.

Things only get worse when she gets a job as a crime scene cleaner, and realises that every call-out involves dealing with the aftermath of an East Asian woman's murder. And then the hungry ghosts show up, one of whom might be Delilah.

This is one of those horror novels where everything would be nightmarish even if there was nothing supernatural going on. Cora is already a lifelong germaphobe, now dealing with a reality where germs might really kill her if she doesn't wash her hands often enough.

People hurl abuse at her in the street: the title refers to the theory that Covid-19 resulted from people eating infected bats in China. Then there's a serial killer on the loose, specifically targeting women who look like her. Adding actual monsters to this mix feels unfairly cruel.

Reading this novel is like having an extended panic attack, as author Kylie Lee Baker uses the many dangers of Cora's world to create a shrieking feedback loop of horror. Nothing and nowhere is safe.

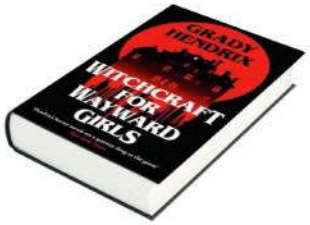
There's no catharsis here, and no escape for either characters or readers: there's very real anger in this book, and very real grief, and there's no easy answer for any of it.

This is a work of fiction. But it feels like more than that. It engages so directly with what's going on in the real world that it'll haunt you long after you put it down. It's a vibrant, pulsatingly righteous response to the horrors around us, and it's masterfully done. Baker is a compelling storyteller, with a great turn of phrase.

But her book will leave you feeling awful, because after reading it you won't be able to stop seeing how truly scary things are out there.

Sarah Dobbs

i Baker worked as a receptionist pre-Covid, so if one good thing came of the pandemic, it was her getting time to write.



WITCHCRAFT FOR WAYWARD GIRLS

★★★★☆

RELEASED 16 JANUARY
496 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Grady Hendrix**
Publisher **Tor Nightfire**

Grady Hendrix is known for *Paperbacks From Hell*, his celebration of '70s horror books, but he's a respected fiction author himself, with a shelf's-worth of luridly titled books to his name. Each of those titles feels like an elevator pitch: *My Best Friend's Exorcism*, *The Final Girl Support Group* and *How To Sell A Haunted House*, to name just a few.

Some critics claim the names are as far as Hendrix's imagination goes, but *Witchcraft For Wayward Girls* should end that curse. Not only is the title slightly more subtle, so is the writing.

Perhaps that's to be expected with a subject this sensitive. We follow Fern, whose teenage pregnancy has led her family to ostracise her, sending her to a home for girls so cruel it'd make Roald Dahl hold up a crucifix. Once there, she finds comfort in new friends, and a strange librarian who's very keen for the girls to read a specific, special, book...

Perfectly pitched and tragically timed, this exploration of the impact of power and control on young women's bodies also reflects the horror all around us in 2025, even though the story takes place in 1970. Hendrix employs a more empathetic tone than usual, and it elevates him as much as it does his characters. Great craft. **Sam Ashurst**

Reviews

UNDER THE EYE OF THE BIG BIRD

★★★★½

RELEASED 16 JANUARY
288 pages | Hardback/ebook
Author **Hiromi Kawakami**
Publisher **Granta Books**

Some stories are designed as puzzles to be solved. Some stories put it all out there for you upfront. Others, well... let's just say they invite you to embrace uncertainty.

It's the future, and humans are going extinct. But this is not the sort of book that has any intention of telling you exactly when, or how. Originally published in Japanese in 2016, Hirom Kawakami's latest is a linked series of snapshots focused on exploration and mood, rather than explanation and plot.

We drop in on individuals and communities in unnamed places and times, sharing slices of life well lived even amid the wider precarity of the species. Sometimes we re-encounter familiar characters; sometimes we meet instead their descendants, or their ancestors.

Mothers raise children created in factories out of dolphin DNA; two young people in a remote village fall in love; a man syncs his consciousness with a hornbill; schoolkids struggle with homework and bullying, and also the fact that they can read minds.

It's a slow, meditative and cumulative portrait of the end of the world as we know it, but Kawakami finds lightness and charm amid the sadness. It turns out there are always new and different ways of being human, even when humanity is dying. **Nic Clarke**

THE WAY UP IS DEATH

★★★☆☆

RELEASED 14 JANUARY
400 pages | Paperback/ebook
Author **Dan Hanks**
Publisher **Angry Robot**

When a massive tower appears floating in the air above the Peak District, 13 people from different walks of life and age groups are transported up to it. Once inside, they are forced to work together to avoid deathtraps based on their own memories, so they can make their way to the top. But who built the tower? What do they want? Who will survive? And will anyone say, "Isn't this all a bit *Squid Games* meets *Lost*?"

Author Dan Hanks can certainly write a witty, page-turning, high-concept romp with a spattering of icky horror, if you can forgive the occasional strained metaphor (describing a monster-filled sea as roiling like a shaken fizzy drink doesn't quite convey the right level of terror).

His main good guys – the ones you know will survive the longest because they're the most fleshed out – are a likeable bunch of sensitive arty types, though the main "baddie" – a self-serving American social media influencer – is about as nuanced as Dick Dastardly.

The main problem with *The Way Up is Death* is that it's a slave to its structure, and any twists are fairly predictable and change the storytelling trajectory very little. The final revelations about human nature are also more than a tad corny – you feel like you want to ruffle the book's hair and go, "Aw, bless." **Dave Golder**

NORTH IS THE NIGHT

★★★☆☆

RELEASED 9 JANUARY
592 pages | Hardback/ebook/ audiobook
Author **Emily Rath**
Publisher **Arcadia**

Romance author Emily Rath moves into fantasy with a series inspired by the *Kalevala*, the national epic of Finland.

When her best friend Aina is abducted to Tuonela, the underworld of the dead, Siiri searches for the only person to have been there and returned, the legendary shaman Väinämöinen. As Siiri begins her quest, Aina contends with the torments of Tuonetar, goddess of death, and her cruel daughters.

Aina and Siiri are compelling, full of personality and passion, although Rath is oddly coy about the attraction between the pair. The novel effectively captures Aina's dread in Tuonela, and the dangers (both mortal and magical) that Siiri faces as she travels north on the shaman's trail.

However, Rath is much stronger at heroes than villains. Tuonetar and her offspring are one-dimensional caricatures of evil, forever cackling or screeching in rage.

The dialogue can feel formal and stilted, and the writing is uneven. Moments of palpable excitement are offset by awkward prose, such as Siiri describing herself in the third person. However, there's an intriguing religious subplot about Christianity invading pagan Finland, a theme sure to feature in the second volume. A spirited adventure, despite its florid excesses. **David West**

WAKE UP AND OPEN YOUR EYES

★★★★☆

RELEASED 7 JANUARY
400 pages | Paperback/ebook/ audiobook
Author **Clay McLeod Chapman**
Publisher **Titan Books**

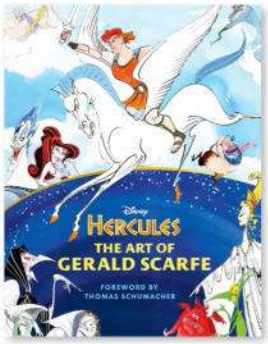
Ever tried to reason with a conspiracy theorist? Whether they believe the government is run by lizards or that vaccinations contain mind-control chips, trying to persuade them that their sources aren't actually credible can be infuriating. But we've got to try, right?

In this apocalyptic thriller, Clay McLeod Chapman paints a grim picture of a future where fake news runs amok. When Noah Fairchild suspects something has happened to his Southern parents, he leaves his liberal Brooklyn bubble and heads into Republican country... just in time for all hell to break loose in "the Great Reawakening".

As stomach-churning violence erupts around him, screens – phones, tablets, televisions – become the enemy, and all hope of telling reality from fiction is lost.

Tonally, the book walks a particularly wobbly tightrope – and mostly succeeds. The horrors are exaggerated, but the basic concept of people becoming radicalised online is all too believable. Chapman smartly identifies a range of different ways unsuspecting people can find themselves drawn into far-right rabbit holes, though his Armageddon has a supernatural origin that feels a bit like a cop-out. Still, as cautionary tales go, it's a persuasive one. **Sarah Dobbs**

BULLET TIME
A BOOK IN BULLET POINTS



HERCULES: THE ART OF GERALD SCARFE

RELEASED 7 JANUARY
336 pages | Hardback
Author **Gerald Scarfe**
Publisher **Insight Editions**

- Gerald Scarfe unveils the work that went into designing Disney's *Hercules*, with an impressive collection of his illustrations.
- Disney's Thomas Schumacher reveals in his introduction that Scarfe's initial drawings were flown to the USA in the cockpit of Concorde, as the pilot was a fan!
- Scarfe loves his winged horse: "I was very intent that Pegasus wouldn't become the usual old dobbin, clip-clopping along".
- But Hades was his favourite; he has a fondness for villains because "Sometimes heroes can be a pain in the butt: dull as ditchwater".
- Hercules was designed to be a cross between Paul Newman and Elvis.
- The book also covers some of Scarfe's other work, including his iconic Pink Floyd collaboration ("We've got to have that guy work for us!").

DAVID CRONENBERG: CLINICAL TRIALS

★★★½☆

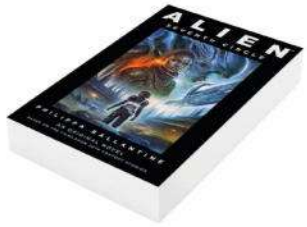
RELEASED OUT NOW!
288 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Authors **Violet Lucca**
Publisher **Abrams**

In the introduction to this handsomely designed overview of David Cronenberg's oeuvre, Violet Lucca sets out her methodology: to explore the director's work using Jungian concepts as a lens.

If that sounds insufferably pompous, don't panic. The first section, titled "Individuation" (after the Jungian process of self-discovery), turns out to be mostly a chronological journey through the making of the films. It's well-researched, Lucca's style here is quite conventional, and she has a knack for unearthing interesting facts.

The back end of the book is equally accessible. Q&As with five key collaborators, including composer Howard Shore and production designer Carol Spier, see Lucca posing general questions about methodology and also delving into specifics. Their accounts convey a clear impression of the man: collaborative, incisive, with a gentle sense of humour.

Clinical Trials only becomes hard work during its central 100 pages, as critical analyses deploy Jungian concepts like the Shadow and the Animus. If any horror director warrants this approach it's Cronenberg – given that he shot a film about Freud and Jung, he'd no doubt approve. But your average fan of *The Fly* may find their eyes sliding off the page. **Ian Berriman**



ALIEN: SEVENTH CIRCLE

★★☆☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
193 pages | Paperback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Phillippa Ballantine**
Publisher **Titan Books**

It's a very bad sign when your *Alien* spin-off opens with lines that sound like they're being bellowed by Garth Marenghi. Though as you travel further into the story here, you uncover things even he'd balk at: naming the operator of a space vehicle "Captain Shipp," for example.

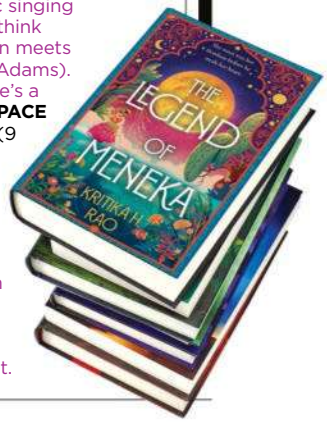
It's not all bad, however; the basic plot has potential. Following on from Phillippa Ballantine's 2022 book *Inferno's Fall*, *Seventh Circle* tracks amnesiac Mae Hendricks as she moves through some truly nightmarish scenarios – including a mutating pathogen, violent space scavengers and all of the slimy eggs, gloopy corpses and shiny monsters you've come to expect.

There's an interesting exploration of the doubles theme which runs through the franchise, but still remains relatively unexplored outside of the books. There's also some enjoyable gore, especially towards the end. But getting there is a challenge, as the writing's so basic you'll drift in and out.

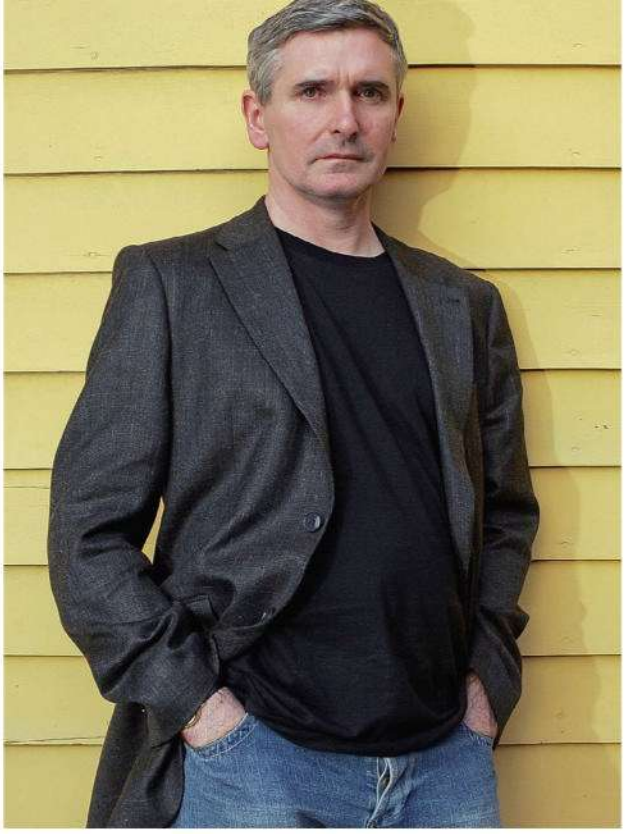
It ends with a pretty huge reveal about the fate of one of our heroes, which has interesting implications for any future instalments. The only problem is, this book's named after the most unpleasant circle of Hell, and that would probably be easier to get through. **Sam Ashurst**

ALSO OUT

Described as "a spicy romantasy steeped in Indian mythology", Kritika H Rao's **THE LEGEND OF MENEKA** (16 January, HarperCollins) centres on celestial dancers known as Asparas, who seduce targets for the political gain of Lord Indra, king of heaven. But on meeting the mortal Kaushika, Meneka finds that he's stealing her heart... Lauren JA Bear's **MOTHER OF ROME** (14 January, Titan) reimagines the legend of the twins Romulus and Remus, founders of the Roman empire, by telling the story of their mother Rhea Silvia. And it's not the only mythological reimagining out that week! AS Webb's **DAUGHTER OF CHAOS** (16 January, Michael Joseph) is set in Ancient Greece, and follows fisherman's daughter Danae, who develops strange powers after eating a mysterious golden apple, then joins up with Heracles and his crew on a quest to the end of the world. A collection of 13 original short stories all penned by black writers, **CAPTAIN AMERICA: THE SHIELD OF SAM WILSON** (14 January, Titan) follows the trials and tribulations of the new African-American Cap – which include thwarting an insurrectionist plot, travelling back in time, and foiling a racist conspiracy. Finally, our reviewer was tickled by Catherynne M Valente's *Space Opera*, in which two has-been glam-rockers are chosen to sing on Earth's behalf in a galactic singing contest (think Eurovision meets Douglas Adams). Now there's a sequel: **SPACE ODDITY** (9 January, Corsair) – though it's more like a series of essays on Valente's universe, with not much plot.



THE WRITE STUFF
THE SFX AUTHOR QUESTIONNAIRE



MR Carey

He's The Guy With All The (Lego) Gifts!

What is your daily writing routine like?

I wish I had a routine. I get up early and get stuck in around 8 or 9am, but I'm very much "Ooh! Squirrel!" I aim to get 2,000 words down before I stop, that's my only rule of thumb.

Do you have any personal mementos or knick-knacks on your desk?

I have an old Wells Fargo wagon train pulled by Professor X of the X-Men in his motorised wheelchair. Please don't ask me why.

How do you deal with writers' block/the urge to procrastinate?

I think it helps to have a designated space you can step into. Right now I'm using the study room in my local library. It's a mile or so away from my house, so I get a good walk in both ways, and it really puts me in the mood for writing. It's a win-win.

Which of your books are you the most proud of?

Probably *The Girl With All The Gifts*. I was trying really hard to capture a child's way of looking at the world – the vividness and the sense of wonder – and I think I part-way succeeded.

> "There's a really bad plot hole in the third Felix Castor novel that I'd love to fix"

Do you have any writing "bad habits" that you have to keep in check?

I have a tendency to over-plot. When I hit a roadblock my instinct is to add stuff in when sometimes the better option is to take stuff out.

Is there anything about one of your books which you wish you could travel back in time and "fix"?

There's a really bad plot hole in the third Felix Castor novel that I'd love to fix. And more generally I think I'd shift the balance of crime thriller to supernatural elements in those books.

Which of your books was the most difficult to write?

Infinity Gate. I tried to restructure it when I was a long way in, and it fell apart in my hands. It was bad enough that I actually gave up on the book for a while. Then I came back to it and started again from scratch. I wouldn't want to go through that again.

Were you a keen reader as a child?

I lived in stories much more than in the real world. My first obsession was with Enid Blyton's fantasy books – *The Wishing Chair*, *The Faraway Tree*, stuff like that. I read those books until they fell apart.

Enid Blyton, a childhood obsession for Carey.

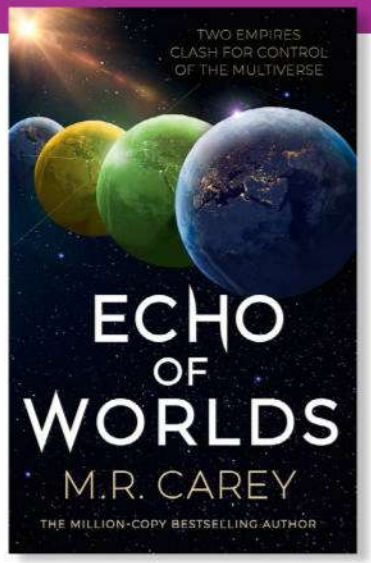
GEORGE KONIG/KEYSTONE FEATURES/GETTY

What would be your desert island book?

The Torturer Quartet by Gene Wolfe. No question.

Which SF/fantasy book published in the last year has most impressed you?

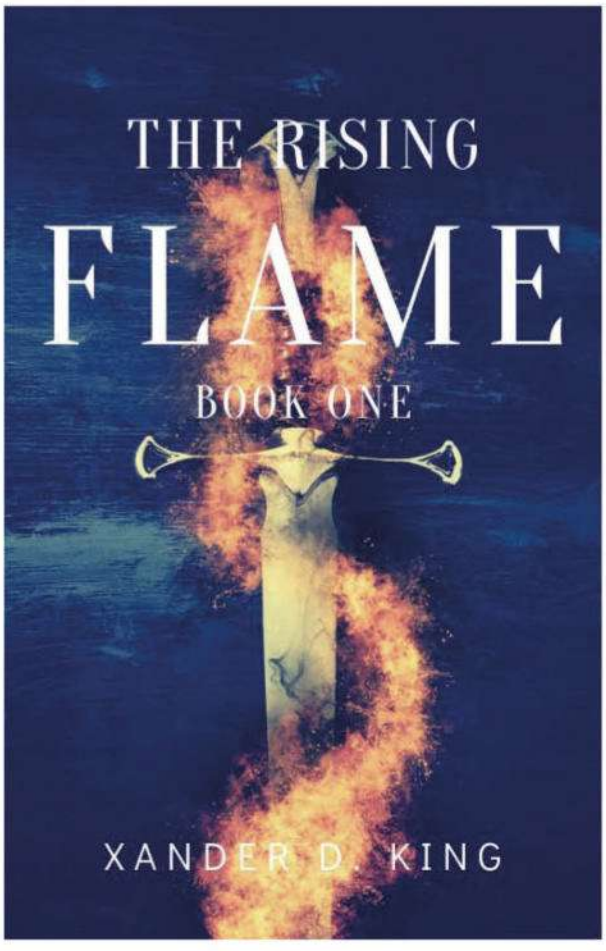
The Mercy Of Gods – the start of James SA Corey's new sequence. I thought I'd spend the whole time missing *The Expanse*, but it really pulled me in.



What's the best gift you've ever received from a reader?

I have two very cool gifts relating to *The Girl With All the Gifts*. One is a beautiful crocheted Melanie, complete with Hannibal Lecter mask and bloodstains. The other is a Lego *The Girl With All The Gifts* set with all the characters.

Echo Of Worlds, the second and final novel in the Pandominion series, is out on 21 January from Orbit.



The Rising Flame: A Captivating High Fantasy Series with Queer Characters and Dark Secrets

Written by Xander D. King, 'The Rising Flame' is the first instalment in a sweeping fantasy series that thrusts readers into the turbulent kingdom of Brorus, where nothing is quite as it seems. This debut novel offers a fresh take on classic fantasy, incorporating LGBT characters and modern themes of power, identity, and belonging.

Through its nuanced portrayal of complex characters and vivid world-building, the novel challenges the boundaries of the genre. With political intrigue, betrayal, and a daring servant boy at the heart of the story, The Rising Flame is poised to captivate a diverse audience.

The first instalment in what promises to be an epic series is available now: https://tinyurl.com/hvssk44s

Instagram: @theworkofxanderking
Email: xanderking1994@gmail.com

BATMAN: THE LAST HALLOWEEN

Closing down Sale

★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

Publisher **DC Comics**

Writer **Jeph Loebt**

Artists **Eduardo Risso, Klaus Janson, Mark Chiarello**

ISSUES 1-3 **It may rank a little** below legendary Batman stories like *The Killing Joke* or *Year One*, but Jeph Loeb and Tim Sale's The Long Halloween saga is still one of *the* classic tales of the Dark Knight. Consisting of 1997's *The Long Halloween*, 1999–2000's *Dark Victory*, and 2004's *Catwoman: When In Rome*, it's part superhero tale, part crime epic. This long-planned 10-issue follow-up is finally concluding the story.

An unavoidable fact, however, is that artist Tim Sale sadly passed away in 2022, only a year after he and Loeb collaborated on 2021's *The Long Halloween Special* (essentially a prologue for this story). Since Sale's visual style and storytelling was so important and distinctive, it was hard to see how DC would deal with his loss.

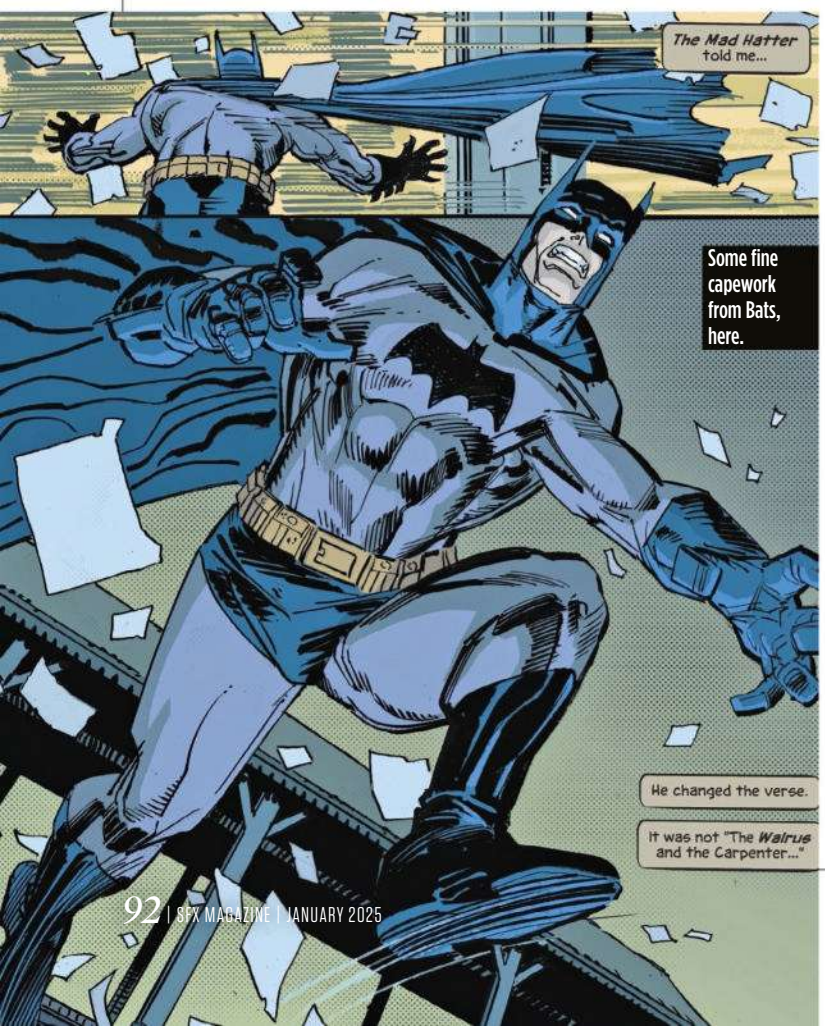
Ultimately they went in an interesting direction. *Batman: The Long Halloween – The Last Halloween* (to give it its unwieldy full title) – features 10 different artists, one on each issue, who are working with Sale's memorable character designs for the various Batman characters, but also maintaining their own specific style and visual approach.

The story picks up the dangling threads from Loeb and Sale's 2021 special, with Harvey Dent and his wife Gilda on the run, and Batman aiming to finally bring them to justice. At the same time, he also has to solve the kidnapping of Jim Gordon's son, and unmask a mysterious copycat of the date-obsessed "Holiday" murderer, who's targeting Gotham villains like Catwoman, the Penguin and Solomon Grundy.

While it's not *impossible* for new readers to enter here, it's certainly not advisable; this is very much the final chapter of a long-running story that plays at the same slow-burning, atmospheric pace as previous instalments. Loeb has set up an effective mystery with some well-crafted twists, and still has a good handle on the characters, especially when it comes to the verbal interplay between Batman and Robin.

On the visual side, the changes in artist across these three issues take a little getting used to, especially since few of them are "traditional" superhero comic artists. Thankfully, even with the major stylistic shifts (like between issue one's Eduardo Risso and issue two's Klaus Janson), it all feels in service to the storytelling.

Each artist is finding a way of making the visuals their own, and combined with the intriguing plot, that means this miniseries is on the way to being a satisfying conclusion to the Long Halloween saga, as well as a fitting tribute to Sale's iconic work. **Saxon Bullock**



i One of Loeb's inspirations for the Batman/Jim Gordon/Harvey Dent relationship was the collapse of the Beatles.

UNIVERSAL MONSTERS: FRANKENSTEIN

★★½☆☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

Publisher **Image Comics**

Writer/artist **Michael Walsh**

ISSUES 1-4 **Following up Image's** previous comic-book reinventions of Dracula and the Creature from the Black Lagoon, this new four-issue miniseries focuses on one of the most memorable movie monsters of them all.

Michael Walsh's take on Frankenstein not only sticks to the flat-headed Boris Karloff interpretation of the Monster, but is arguably the most faithful of these series so far, threading new elements directly into scenes from the original 1931 movie.

As in that film, we follow the crazed Dr Frankenstein as he reanimates a patchwork creature made up of pieces of dead bodies, only for his experiment to run out of control and ruin his life.

There are new sequences and characters – most notably, a young boy whose dead father's hands are grafted onto the Monster – and a darker, more graphic tone. However, Walsh misses out on the original film's odd playfulness and camp, and also leaves many of the dialogue sequences feeling lifeless.

The series is at its best when dealing directly with the Monster (often in silent sequences), and does capture the character's tragedy and haunted soulfulness. It's just a pity Walsh can't sustain this elsewhere, leaving the result as a frustrating read that never quite coheres. **Saxon Bullock**

BATTLE ACTION FORCE

RELEASED **22 JANUARY**
Publisher **Rebellion/Total Toy Books**
Writers/artists **Various**

COLLECTIONS **Debuting in war** weekly *Battle* in 1983, *Action Force* – like its American equivalent *GI Joe* – often veered into sci-fi territory with characters like bionic driver Red Jackal. With its numerous divisions such as Space Force and the naval Q-Force, it resembles a more militaristic version of one of Gerry Anderson's defence organisations.

Lavishly reproduced at even larger size than the original comic pages, these first three volumes focus on the Red Shadows, the sinister terrorist organisation run by bucket-headed villain Count Ironblood. Largely written by Gerry Finley-Day (along with James Tomlinson – pen name James Nicholas – and Scott Goodall), there's an enthusiastic pulpy feel to the stories, although the characterisation is thin – unsurprisingly so, given *Action Force*'s toy line origins.

The art (by the likes of Jim Watson, Vanyo, Cam Kennedy, Geoff Campion, John Cooper and Ron Turner) is solid and varied in style, adding just enough grit to the cartoony plots. The pricing is pretty hefty (£60+), and given its extensive back matter, volume three **Axis Of Evil** ★★★☆☆ is a less essential purchase compared to the first two, **Red Tide Rising** and **World In Peril** ★★★★☆. But these impressive Treasury Editions are definitely worth visiting, whether they take you back to your childhood war games or not. **Stephen Jewell**

THE TERMINATOR

He said he'd be back...

★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **Dynamite Entertainment**
Writer **Declan Shalvey**
Artists **David O'Sullivan, Luke Sparrow, Colin Craker**

ISSUES 1-3 **While the movie** franchise has offered up middling results for more than 20 years now, Netflix's recent *Terminator Zero* anime proved there's still life in the franchise yet. This new comic takes a similarly fresh approach. Written by Declan Shalvey and illustrated by a range of artists, it's a stripped-back affair that returns the franchise to its most elemental principles: ordinary people trying to survive encounters with an invincible killer cyborg.

Dynamite's licence means that characters from *Terminator 2* onwards are off limits here. Rather than that restricting things, however, it allows Shalvey and co to open up the world with new characters in different settings and time periods. This is an anthology series, but across the first three issues you can't help but notice connective tissue that may end up linking the stories across its 10 instalments.

> **"Returns the franchise to its most elemental principles"**

Issue one is largely set in 2018, long after Judgment Day. Harper and Penny are an elderly couple living a peaceful life off-the-grid in rural Alaska when an ancient, rusted Terminator drags itself out of the lake. Issues two and three move the action to 1976 and follow a US soldier in the Vietnam War as he also comes up against a cyborg assassin.

These stories are simple but effective, the bleak tone and retro-tinged art (most notably from the series' core illustrator David O'Sullivan) recalling the pulp thrills of old EC horror comics. By stripping *The Terminator* of its baggage, this new take reminds you why Cameron's original movie remains so primal and thrilling.

Will Salmon

i Each of the 10 issues comes with a serialised backup strip by Sal Crivelli and Colin Craker, titled "Buried Alive".

PRODIGY: SLAVE OF MARS

★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW/ 8 JANUARY**
Publisher **Dark Horse Comics/ Millarworld**
Writer **Mark Millar**
Artist **Stefano Landini**

ISSUES 1-5 **Mark Millar's** billionaire mastermind Edison Crane uses brawn as much as his considerable brainpower, just like his archvillain Nemesis. With our hero resembling a cross between James Bond and Tony Stark, this tightly plotted five-parter is packed full of exhilaratingly cinematic, fast-paced action sequences, as well as numerous Sherlock-esque cerebral conundrums, which are all intriguingly solved.

Third run *Slave Of Mars* is a family affair: we're introduced not only to Eddie's father, who is swiftly murdered in the first issue's opening sequence, but also to his errant older brother Elijah. With Edison stripped of his fortune and framed for murder, they're pursued by suspiciously bombastic bad guy Froth Schroeder – although a final issue reveal of their true adversary ties into some timely concerns about advanced technology.

As the subtitle indicates, we eventually visit the Red Planet; there are references to Erich von Däniken-inspired stargates and ancient aliens too. Millar also throws in some deadly nanotech butterflies for good measure. Stefano Landini, meanwhile, brings a visceral quality to the frequent grisly moments. It all makes for a comic that isn't too clever for its own good. **Stephen Jewell**

STALKER 2: HEART OF CHORNOBYL

The Zone Of Interest

★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Reviewed on **PC**
Also on **Xbox Series X|S**
Publisher **GSC Game World**

VIDEOGAME **In the Zone – the** apocalyptic Ukrainian setting of *STALKER 2: Heart Of Chornobyl* – there are two types of person. The first believes that the Zone, abandoned and irradiated due to the 1986 Chornobyl disaster, is an abominable hellscape. The second sees its brutal way of life, mutants and impossible natural disasters as a miracle from beyond.

The division mirrors *STALKER 2*: for every player that walks away from this first-person shooter because of its many bugs or unforgiving difficulty, another will be enamored by it. Playing as protagonist Skif, you'll try and work out what the Zone truly is, following a branching storyline that lets you side with a number of factions that claim to know the answer.

Throughout it all, however, your main goal will be to merely survive. Skif needs to eat and sleep, wounds need to be bandaged, and anomalies – phenomena that can range from invisible hurricanes to erupting pillars of fire – are commonplace.

But *STALKER 2* is deadliest during frantic shootouts, where just one bullet can take or lose a life. There's nothing quite like popping out from cover to headshot a bandit, only to drop back down and bandage a gunshot when their friend returns fire. It's incredibly hard yet deeply immersive, one of very few shooters that will leave you shaking even after the last clouds of smoke have cleared.

> **"The concrete sprawl of Pripyat is thick with corpses"**

Yet despite its constant tension, *STALKER 2* is beautiful. Lush green fields and sparse woods suggest nothing of their danger, but the region's supernatural atmosphere still finds ways to manifest. There are sleep-inducing poppy fields and blood-red forests, while the concrete sprawl of Pripyat is thick with corpses. Even after playing for 60 hours, there's much we still haven't seen.

Unfortunately, all of this is let down by constant bugs. Many are purely visual, but there are also game-breaking issues. Fortunately the developers have been busy patching these since release.

Your mileage with *STALKER 2* will depend on how much of this you can look past, and whether you find the game's challenge to be immersive or frustrating. Those who can meet it on its own terms will find an undeniable miracle within. **Andy Brown**

i Both *STALKER* developer Volodymyr Yezhov and *STALKER 2* voice actor Oleksiy Khilskyi died in combat fighting Russia.

"Gods, what eldritch horror is th – oh, a bubble."

SORRY WE'RE CLOSED

★★★★½

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Reviewed on **PC**
Publisher **Akupara Games**

VIDEOGAME **Spending her days** working at the local corner shop and chatting with friends, Michelle has been sleepwalking through her life since a bad break-up. Yet the cure that will snap her awake may be a night terror. The demonic Duchess pays her a visit, bestowing Michelle with a Third Eye in order to allow her to glimpse the world of angels and demons, in the hopes that her love can fill the void left in demonkind after the Fall.

To Michelle, this gift is a curse, shoving her into a world much closer to home than she thought. If she's to have any hope of breaking free, she must track down those cursed before her, finding where her heart lies in the process.

Visually, the game's phenomenal, mixing high-contrast low-poly PS1-style graphics with detailed textures that crib from Renaissance-style paintings of divinity.

It plays like a cross between *Resident Evil* and *Silent Hill*. Each location Michelle must shoot through has two sides she can switch between – the human world and the demon – creating a small bubble of the other world with a snap of her fingers. Catching enemies within the switch opens them up to take combo damage from her hellish arsenal.

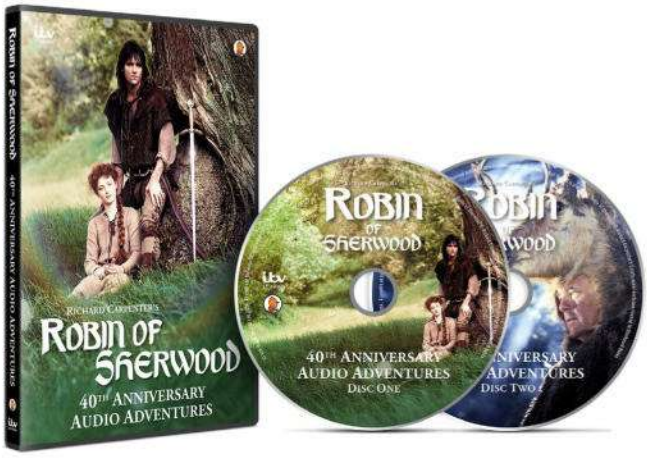
It's an inventive genre twist that, combined with genuinely pithy and endearing writing, makes for a blessed combo itself. **Oscar Taylor-Kent**

ROBIN OF SHERWOOD 40th Anniversary Audio Adventures

Celebrate Hood times

★★★½☆

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Running time **118 minutes**
- Format **CD**
- Publisher **AUK Studios**



AUDIO DRAMA **After a good chunk** of the original cast and crew were reunited for audio adventure *Robin Of Sherwood: The Knights Of The Apocalypse* in 2016, it's a delight to see the same thing happen here to mark the show's 40th year. This time round, however, the results are less consistent... although still enjoyable. This was made *by* fans *for* fans, after all.

"The Huntress" is set in the show's first season and features almost all of the main cast, with Jon Culshaw doing a cracking job filling in for (the presumably unavailable) Ray Winstone's Will Scarlet. It's a simple tale in which Robin (Michael Praed) seeks justice for a double murder under the instructions of a new Herne the Hunter – a woman, no less. As with "Knights", it's such a delight to hear the cast back together that it's like experiencing a brand-new episode of the show itself.

"Brothers In Qualms" is a two-hander between the Sheriff (Nickolas Grace) and his brother Hugo (Philip Jackson) as they unexpectedly find themselves languishing in Nottingham Castle's dungeon. Hearing the two men bicker and bitch for half an hour is a blast, and you can tell the actors are genuinely relishing every second. Expect in-jokes and Easter eggs galore.

The box set's least successful segment is "Until A May Morning", a story written by Jennifer Ash and read by Judi Trott, which retells the opening scenes of the very first episode of *Robin Of Sherwood* from Marion's perspective.

While it's rather lovely to hear Trott so enthusiastically lending more depth to her character, it doesn't add much that's new to the mythos.

Jayne Nelson

i The first mention of Herne the Hunter in British legend is in Shakespeare's *Merry Wives Of Windsor*. He's from Berkshire!

THE LIGHTNING THIEF: PERCY JACKSON

Percy's Progress

★★★½☆

- RUNNING UNTIL **2 February**
- Venue **The Other Palace, London**
- Director **Lizzi Gee**

MUSICAL **Percy Jackson fans get** to see a lot of their hero, don't they? There are Rick Riordan's original books. Two Hollywood movies. A videogame. A television series. And, in 2014, a Percy Jackson musical landed off-Broadway.

Ten years on, a longer version has hit London in a theatre so tiny that fans will continue to see a lot of Percy – namely because he's almost on their laps. The size of the Other Palace's stage is a problem: one sequence involving a Minotaur is undermined by the fact that it can only move a few steps. Still, the cast more than make up for the titchy space, belting out catchy songs with lungs so big it's a miracle they fit in the room.

Max Harwood's Percy is, by necessity, a bit whiny, but he brings a sweet bashfulness that's complemented by the charms of his pals Annabeth (Jessica Lee, energetic) and Grover (Scott Folan, rocking satyr legs). Paisley Billings, who plays Percy's mum and others, is staggering; she earned the biggest applause of our press-night crowd. And extra kudos goes to Greg Barnett as the Centaur Chiron, whose horsey booty needs to be seen to be believed. Brilliantly, he also plays Poseidon as a stoned Matthew McConaughey type.

> **"The cast make up for the titchy space, belting out catchy songs"**

Sure, the second act feels a bit rushed, with Percy's road trip across America screeching past at the speed of a lightning bolt thrown by Zeus.

But that's a small price to pay for a fun build-up and a surprisingly dramatic finale. Hopefully these demigods will get to stretch out on a bigger stage sooner or later.

Jayne Nelson

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i Rick Riordan says that he's never watched the two *Percy Jackson* movies, as they were made without his involvement.

Blastermind
The SFX quiz

HAUNTED HOUSES

In honour of Steven Soderbergh's entry into the genre, we test your knowledge of some very *un*desirable residences

Quizmaster **Ian Berriman, Deputy Editor**

QUESTION 1
Who wrote the 1959 novel on which *The Haunting* was based?

QUESTION 2
Describe the look of the titular spectre in David Lowery's 2017 film *A Ghost Story*.

QUESTION 3
In the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episode "Sub Rosa", who falls in love with a "ghost" eventually revealed to be an anaphasic lifeform?

QUESTION 4 Picture Question
In which film would you find this haunted house?

QUESTION 4

QUESTION 5
In *Poltergeist*, what's the name of the housing development (built on top of a cemetery) where the Freeling family live?

QUESTION 6
In the *Doctor Who* episode "Hide", who played the professor investigating a haunting?

QUESTION 7
William Castle's 1959 film *House On Haunted Hill* sent a skeleton flying over the heads of the audience. By what name was this gimmick known?

QUESTION 8 Picture Question
Supply the title that's been removed from this poster.

QUESTION 8

QUESTION 9
Which TV series had a haunted house episode called "How The Ghosts Stole Christmas"?

QUESTION 10
And which TV series had a haunted house episode called "Night Visitors"?

QUESTION 12

QUESTION 11
What's the big twist at the end of Alejandro Amenábar's 2001 film *The Others*?

QUESTION 12 Picture Question
In which film would you find this haunted house?

QUESTION 13
Who wrote the screenplay for the 1989 TV version of *The Woman In Black*?

QUESTION 14
Who was the leading man of the 1944 haunted house chiller *The Uninvited*?

QUESTION 15
Which movie franchise includes entries subtitled *The Marked Ones* and *The Ghost Dimension*?

QUESTION 16

QUESTION 16 Picture Question
In which TV series would you find this haunted house?

QUESTION 17
What's the surname of the family bothered by Beetlejuice in the 1988 film of the same name?

QUESTION 18
Which author wrote the 2006 ghost story novel *The Secret Of Crickley Hall*?

QUESTION 19
In *Ghostwatch*, what is the nickname of the central poltergeist?

QUESTION 20
Which rapper had a number 12 UK hit in 1986 with "Amityville (The House On The Hill)"?

Answers
1 Shirley Jackson 2 A man covered by a sheet 3 Beverly Crusher 4 *The Amityville Horror* 5 Cuesta Verde 6 Dougray Scott 7 Emergo 8 *The Changelling* 9 *The X-Files* 10 Logan's *Run* 11 The protagonist is a ghost 12 *Crimson Peak* 13 Nigel Kneale 14 Ray Milland 15 *Paranormal Activity* 16 *Ghosts* 17 Deetz 18 James Herbert 19 Pipes 20 Lovebug Starski

How did you do?

How scary is your ghost?

0-5
Child in a sheet

6-10
Casper the friendly ghost

11-15
Slimer

16-19
The Headless Horseman

20
Sadako

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"What colour is Tuesday?"

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YELLOWJACKETS
TIME FOR YOUR THIRD COURSE

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Total Recall

Personal recollections of cherished sci-fi and fantasy

Now that's what you call a proper poker face.

Huey, Dewey And Louie

Dave Bradley, freelance writer

In 1977, I saw *Star Wars* on the big screen, and fell in love with R2-D2. This page, however, is about the moment a few years later when I saw *Silent Running*. I tuned in when it came on TV because there would be spaceships and droids. Woo-hoo!

My excitement was premature, but I was mesmerised by the movie's darker tone. There are three little robots, but these are not comic relief. They are emotional anchors in a melancholy story. The faceless drones provide a steadfast counterpoint to increasingly unhinged human behaviour in a tale steeped in obsession and isolation.

Silent Running takes place on the freighter Valley Forge, an ecological ark. In a future where Earth's environment no longer sustains plant life, forest specimens survive in greenhouses in space. The domes on Valley Forge are tended by the three drones and botanist Freeman Lowell (played by Bruce Dern). When the company decides to scrap the biomes for commercial reasons, Lowell resists, killing his fellow crew members.

Renaming his metal mates after the Disney ducks (nephews of Donald), Lowell absconds into deep space. He begins talking and playing poker with the drones to pass the time.

An accident on the way through Saturn's rings destroys Louie, and Huey is damaged in a buggy accident. Then Lowell discovers his plants are dying without light. He erects sunlamps to sustain them, and jettisons the final greenhouse with Dewey as its steward, before blowing himself up.

Huey, Dewey and Louie are squat, sloping boxes on sturdy legs, closer cousins to the "gonk" power droid from *Star Wars* than R2-D2. They have a functional, industrial design, with few anthropomorphic features beyond a single arm that extends from the front panel. They don't speak; they communicate through movement alone – well, and the occasional hydraulic hiss.

Double-amputee actors were inside the casings (with their hands in the drones' feet). They lent them incredible pathos through body language. Nowhere is this more apparent than in their grief at key moments. When Huey is damaged, by refusing to leave his side Dewey displays unexpected compassion.

Over 50 years later the film's environmental theme seems even more pertinent. And that image of Dewey bravely tending the forests alone still haunts me today.

Some days, Dave would like to escape into space in a flying garden.

Fact Attack!

- Most of *Silent Running* was shot on-board the USS Valley Forge, a retired aircraft carrier that was about to be cut up for scrap.
- Inside the drones were Steve Brown and Cheryl Sparks (both Huey); Mark Persons (Dewey); and Larry Whisenhunt (Louie).
- All four drone actors were pretty young: Brown was only 15, Whisenhunt 16, Sparks 17, and Persons the veteran of the group, at 20!
- The drone casings weighed in at about 20 lbs each. To save the actors' strength, sometimes they were wheeled about on a trolley.
- In a 2008 interview, Pixar director Andrew Stanton acknowledged the influence of *Silent Running*'s drones (and R2-D2) on *WALL-E*.

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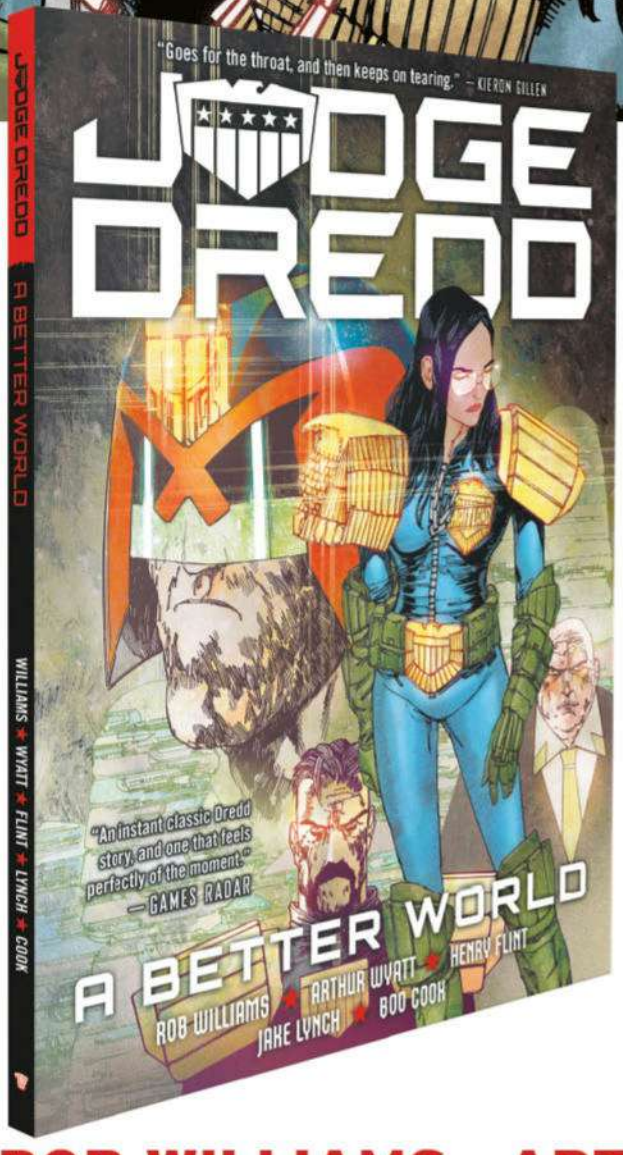
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